

BROWN, V. C.

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BY

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AUTHOR OF

"Woeling O't," "Admiral's Ward's," "By Woman's Wit," "A Winning Hazard," Etc., Etc.

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CHAPTER I.

"WELL, Mrs. Wingrove, this is a pretty business," said the Doctor, planting himself on the hearthrug with his back to the fireless grate.

"A very bad business, Dr. Macnab!" was the reply, in a stern voice. "I don't know what's to be done! It's a downright calamity."

The Doctor did not reply for an instant. He was a stout, short man—more bony than fleshy—with thick, dull, dark hair, an obstinate-looking snub nose, and a pair of keen eyes of no particular color, that flashed and twinkled under shaggy eyebrows.

His interlocutor was a tall, thin, iron-gray woman, with a twist of strongly waved hair on the top of her head. Sombre, steady eyes, a closely-shut mouth, a strong jaw, and square back, gave her rather a repellant aspect. She was well dressed in black alpaca, and wore a linen collar, fastened by a large mourning brooch.

The scene of the interview was a small parlor in a neatly-kept, respectable-looking house standing in a garden. The name of "Laburnam Lodge" was painted

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on the gate, but the residence was better known as No. 17, Oakely Road, St. John's Wood.

"What's to be done, eh?" repeated the Doctor, in an absent tone; then with sudden briskness, "Register the birth without loss of time—make sure of that. I can tell you, you're in luck to have even as much warning as enabled you to send for me. If I am not much mistaken, that unfortunate woman would have concealed—or tried to conceal—the whole thing. Suppose she had murdered the infant. Where would you have been?"

"Bless my soul, Doctor, whatever the poor lady may have been driven to she never would have done that!—a nicer spoken, gentler creature never was."

"Perhaps so! Anyhow, I never met so plucky a woman in all my experience. Why, she bore all that agony almost without a cry. And what a perfect woman, too. It is a deuced bad business. How did she come here? I've had no time to ask anything."

"It was little over a fortnight ago—not three days after the people who had been with me all June and July were gone, and I had the drawing-rooms all cleaned up, when a cab, with a biggish dress basket outside, drove up, about seven in the evening. A tall lady in a great loose, dark cloak got out, and asked to see the rooms."

"The whole house was empty just then, so she chose the drawing-room with the bedroom behind it. She was so handsome, and so much the lady, that I was half ashamed of mentioning a reference, but I did. She smiled very pleasant like, and says 'I can't give you that, but I will pay my rent every week in ad-

vanee,' and with that she took out her purse and gave me one pound ten—which are my out-of-season terms, exclusive of gas and kitchen fire—and which she has paid punctual ever since. Then she says, 'I shall not be long in town; I am here for medical advice, having some internal trouble. I must see Sir James Paget every week, but I hope to escape an operation. If I am obliged to submit to one,' says she, 'I shall go into a nursing home, and I do not want any friends to know anything till I am all right again.' There was something in her speech not quite English, but her voice is sweet, isn't it, sir?"

"I have hardly heard it; and she calls herself Mrs. Brown, eh? Could you make out nothing? What's the mark on her linen?"

"None at all! she has plenty—nice and fine and quite new, but not a mark. Well, sir, she has been nearer three weeks than a fortnight here, and she was always muffled up in such loose clothes that I never suspected what was the matter. Yesterday she seemed very poorly, and I sat a bit with her, and asked her if she would like to see my doctor. But she said no, she was going to see Sir James Paget the next day, and would then let me know if she was to go into the nursing home or not. She seemed a little better when I bid her good-night, but about six o'clock the next morning, Jane, my servant, came to me, and says she, 'I wish you'd come to Mrs. Brown, ma'am. She is taken very bad.'"

"What's the matter?' said I beginning to dress myself.

"God forgive me, if I'm wrong,' says Jane; 'but

it's my belief that we'll have a baby in the house before many hours are over.' Of course, I told her to hold her tongue for a stupid gaby; but I went downstairs and saw the lady, and above all, when she caught hold of my hand and squeezed it, as if she would twist it off, I began to think that Jane was no fool after all. Then I sent posthaste for you, Doctor, and you know the rest."

"It's a curious case. The woman has money, and yet she has made no preparations—not a scrap of clothes ready for the unfortunate child. If you hadn't had the duds you kept in memory of the poor little chap you lost, what should we have done?"

"I ought to have told you, sir, that just before I came down to speak to you the poor soul opened her eyes and whispered, 'Have patience, I have a strange, sad story to tell you; do not leave me'—and I do believe she has a cruel tale to tell. She is no common woman."

"Anyway, she has an uncommon fine boy. Now I must go, Mrs. Wingrove. I'll send up a composing draught at once, and look in about ten o'clock to see that all's right before I go home. I think you seem to know how to manage, and as you have no other lodgers you might as well do the nursing and get the pay—for I fancy she will pay."

A few more directions and the Doctor left the house, Mrs. Wingrove closing the door after him.

"What materials we Doctors could supply to novelists," mused Macnab, as he walked briskly towards his own abode to snatch a hasty dinner before completing the day's task. "This woman, now—she must have a

strange history. She might be a princess from her aspect, her ways, her indescribable refinement. She's not English, that's certain. Just at the last—when she didn't quite know what she was saying or doing—she talked some queer lingo. It was not French, or German, or Italian. Well, well! I hope my good friend, Mrs. Wingrove, will not be a loser by the adventure. Surely, at such a time, some one will come and see the unfortunate woman!"

Meantime, silence and quiet reigned in Laburnam Lodge. Mrs. Wingrove stole noiselessly back to the patient's chamber to relieve Jane, who had just laid a loose roll of flannel which contained the new-born infant, into an oblong laundress's basket, seized upon in the stress of circumstances to do duty as a cradle.

"She is sleeping quite peaceful, ma'am," said Mrs. Wingrove's servant and prime minister—Jane Dowty—who was little younger than her mistress, and had entered her service when she had first ventured her savings in the bold enterprise of letting apartments, fifteen years before.

"Then go and get your tea, Jane. Make a little more gruel to be ready for the night, draw the curtains and light the lamp there behind the screen. I'll sit here and make a list of what is most needed for the poor lamb. You need not come back till I ring."

But the poor, feeble mother was not asleep. The door had hardly closed upon Jane when Mrs. Wingrove, looking towards the bed, saw the deep blue eyes of its occupant gazing at her with an imploring expression.

"What is it, ma'am? Do you want anything?"

"Only that you will stay with me. Do not let any-one else come, can pay for your services," came in a low whisper from the invalid.

"Make your mind easy, my dear, I'll have no strange nurse in here!" A smile passed over the poor mother's face, and with a sigh she again closed her eyes as if in sleep.

Mrs. Wingrove made an entry now and again with a stumpy pencil on a slip of paper, and at intervals sat quite still as if in the deepest thought. Jane crept back and gave the patient her composing draught. The doctor paid his promised visit, and pronounced all going on well.

A temporary bed was prepared for Mrs. Wingrove in her patient's room, and a tranquil night succeeded the extraordinary excitement of the day.

The usual routine succeeded, and things went on smoothly; but the third day, Mrs. Brown was extremely feverish. The doctor was watchful and uneasy. "She'll come all right, though," he said as he bade Mrs. Wingrove good night.

"What is the saving of her is her resolute silence; another woman would waste her strength and harass her brains chattering. It's the tendency in this feverish condition; but Mrs. Brown is determined to hold her tongue and has the resolution to keep to it."

"That's all very well, Doctor, but I don't understand how it is she never wants that sweet baby in her arms."

"Hoot, toot!" returned the doctor. "The poor woman hasn't the strength to care about anything yet, and mind you, Mrs. Wingrove, don't you go 'speering,

after that story she promised to tell you—just leave it to herself, she must not be agitated."

"Well, Doctor, I am the last person in the world to give way to foolishness of that kind," in an offended tone; "though I think I have some right to an explanation. Of course, if I had known what she wanted the rooms for I should never have taken her in."

"Yes, of course, she ought to explain matters, and she will—meantime it's to our interest to get her well and away. It would be very awkward for you if she died in your house, and you without a notion where she came from."

"Bless us and save us, Doctor; don't mention such a thing."

"Have you cautioned your milkman as to the quality of the milk he supplies? That child is in splendid health—we must not let him fall off. The mother is doing very well, too, but for this feverish turn. It's a close, muggy sort of night, so keep a crack of the window open. I'll be round about eleven to-morrow."

As the doctor prophesied, Mrs. Brown recovered from this touch of fever and made satisfactory progress. In due time she was partially dressed and lifted on to a sofa. When Mrs. Wingrove thought it time to try and interest the mother in her baby—as her silence and quietude seemed unnatural to the grave but kindly landlady—

"Will you please hold baby a bit, ma'am, while I see about your dinner; it's near one o'clock."

"He can lie in his basket, can't he? I am so awkward. I never touched so young a baby before."

"Well, ma'am, you couldn't have a finer one to

begin with. See, the dear lamb is noticing my brooch—the light falls on it. He really does notice already.”

“You seem fond of children, Mrs. Wingrove. Have you had many?”

“Only one, ma’am; and it pleased God to take him when he was but a year old. It was a bitter cross. He’d have been nineteen now, had he been spared. It seems as if I had my sweet infant back when I look at yours in the little frocks I worked with such joy and pride.”

“Joy—pride,” murmured Mrs. Brown. “Is there anything to be proud of in having a baby?”

“I’m sure I don’t know if it’s reasonable or unreasonable; but I think mothers are proud of their babies, especially if they love the father.”

“If—ah yes! What a tremendous if.”

“Look, m’m, the precious dear; he is turning his head after the light. Well, he is forward.”

“How curious those first dawns of intelligence are,” said the mother languidly, glancing at the morsel of humanity which lay placidly on Mrs. Wingrove’s knee.

“Here’s your dinner, ma’am!” exclaimed the latter, as a jingle of plates and knives made itself heard, “and I do hope you’ll try and eat. If you could only gather a little more strength you would make a first-rate recovery.”

“I will try, Mrs. Wingrove. When do you think the doctor will let me travel?”

“Not for three or four weeks yet, that I’m sure, ’m,” and depositing the infant in the basket Mrs. Wingrove proceeded to cut up some sweet-bread for her patient.

"You give me too many dainties!" said Mrs. Brown. "When I have had my sleep after dinner I want to give you some money, you have not had any for a long time. There is a small box covered with leather in the drawer of which I asked you to keep the key. Pray bring it to me."

"I will, ma'am; but please eat your dinner while it is hot."

This was rather a remarkable day to Mrs. Wingrove, as she detailed to Dr. Macnab on the first opportunity for a private talk, which was not till a couple of days later.

"I'm thinking, sir, you are about right; Mrs. Brown has given me the full amount of my bills for the last three weeks and a five pound note for myself, which is very handsome, to say nothing of a sovereign for Jane. Then she gave me this note for you, Doctor, and she smiled very pleasant like, and said, "you must not keep me much longer for I am nearly at the end of my money, and I have a long journey before me."

"Hum!" said the doctor opening the note, "A very polite, prettily-worded epistle enclosing another fiver and apologizing for the small amount. It is quite enough—she hasn't given me much trouble—but Mrs. Wingrove—keep a sharp look out. I fancy Mrs. Brown is rather in a hurry to get off—don't let her give you the slip. She will owe you another five or six pounds before she can get off. I'm a good deal exercised in my mind about this mysterious lady! She has never told you the story she promised yet?"

"Well, no, Doctor; but for all that I don't doubt but that she is all right! She asked me to give her

a little leather box, and unlocked it with a tiny bit of a key she wears round her neck, even under her nightgown. The box was that heavy! I'm thinking there's a lot more in it than I've seen. Anyway I shall be quite sorry when she goes. I shall miss that blessed baby wofully; as to Mrs. Brown herself, I don't care how appearances may be, I am quite sure she is all right, and a real lady—perhaps with a brute of a husband."

"May be so," said the doctor—"unfortunately some very well-bred women have gone wrong before now—anyhow, when Mrs. Brown does give herself the trouble of speaking she has an uncommon pleasant way with her—but," he paused and shook his head—"she has gone through some great trouble, and, Mrs. Wingrove, I'd keep a sharp lookout when she is a little stronger, she is desperately anxious to be off."

"That may be, Doctor, but whatever she does will be fair and straight! She was saying to me only yesterday that she would be glad to know of a respectable girl to go with her as nursemaid, as she could not travel alone with the baby, and I have promised to look for a nursemaid for her—so you see——"

"See what? The nursemaid! No, not even in my mind's eye!"

"Oh, you will have your joke, sir!"

"Well, it's a curious experience altogether, Mrs. Wingrove, and I wish it was well over and done with."

"Anyhow, I don't fancy there will be much harm to us, sir."

"Time will show, Mrs. Wingrove."

The unexpected baby was now about five weeks old

and Mrs. Brown had been up and dressed and in the drawing-room for several days; still she neither sent letters nor received them—yet she wrote a good deal, for both Mrs. Wingrove, and Jane frequently found her engaged with her pen when they suddenly entered the room.

All this time Mrs. Wingrove had scarcely left the house, but as her lodger increased in strength she began to think more of her own affairs.

"I really must go into the city to-morrow, Jane," she said, "I want to pay up the installment due on the house; I have let it pass over three days, and I never was as much out before since I undertook to buy it."

"Yes'm, I would not let it go longer if I were you."

"If it's fine, we may persuade Mrs. Brown to go out. It's high time that poor, dear infant were christened, and I can't get his mother to think of it."

"And that's a pity 'm," replied Jane,

When Doctor Macnab called the next day early in the afternoon, he found Mrs. Wingrove had gone into town, and Jane was in attendance.

"I don't think Mrs. Brown so well, sir," she said, in reply to her query—"How are we to-day?" "Her head is that bad that she could not stay in bed with it. I heard her moving about her room last night,"

"Perhaps the baby——" began the doctor.

"Oh, no, sir! My missis keeps the baby nights."

"This won't do! I can't have Mrs. Brown's head going wrong." And the doctor mounted the stairs rapidly.

He was not very long with his patient, and when

Jane came to open the door for him he said he was not at all satisfied. "I believe it's a nervous headache. Go to her at once; I have left her the name of a new remedy, which you had better get as soon as your mistress comes in. I haven't it at my surgery; you can get it at any big chemist's. Don't let her have any tea this afternoon."

When the doctor had gone, Jane went up to the drawing-room; she found Mrs. Brown sitting on the sofa, at one end of which the baby lay, on an extempore bed, made up of a pillow and an Indian shawl. She was gazing intently at the child, who was yawning and stretching, after a profound sleep.

"She is taking to it at last, poor little soul," thought Jane.

"The doctor recommends me to take this new cure for nervous headache. He has written the name here, but I really cannot pronounce it. I wish you would go for it at once," said Mrs. Brown, holding out a card.

"Well 'm, the doctor said I had better go when missis came back."

"He does not know how I am suffering, Jane. Here is money for the omnibus, and I will let Mrs. Wingrove in when she comes."

"Well 'm, you do look bad! It will not take long."

"No; but, Jane, I want you to go to a chemist I have great faith in—Williams, in New Oxford Street—I do not remember the number, but it is very little past Tottenham Court Road, on the same side."

"Yes'm," hesitatingly; but my missis would rather I was not out at the same time as herself, only——"

"When do you think she will be back," with unusual eagerness.

"About half-past three, ma'am, and it's now twenty past two."

"Then I am sure, Jane, Mrs. Wingrove would not like me to suffer for an additional hour," said Mrs. Brown, with an insinuating smile.

"Very well 'm, if you'll please explain to Mrs. Wingrove."

"Yes, certainly, Jane."

Jane, who was not given to vanity, was ready in a few minutes, and came for the money and the name of the infallible cure, which the doctor had written on the back of one of his own cards.

"There, Jane—there is half a sovereign for you to pay for the stuff and your omnibus, and keep the change," added Mrs. Brown graciously.

"Thank you, ma'am, you are good I'm sure," returned Jane, brightening up, for she loved to add an unexpected trifle to her private hoard. "I daresay I'll be back within the hour, and I'll take the key so as I needn't trouble you, ma'am."

"Yes, do Jane, no doubt you will return before Mrs. Wingrove; remember Williams, New Oxford Street, between Tottenham Court Road and Mudie's."

"She is no stranger to London, anyhow," said her Jane, as she hurried away on her errand. "if I haven't forgotten to take up b^o and struggling will want it before I am back, b^onds trembled too now."

An hour later Mrs. Wingrove Wingrove. The next but pleased at having settled her se. Jane flew to the bottle, adding some hot

and escaping a fine on account of her previous punctuality.

She felt quite anxious to see her blessed nurseling and his mother, whom she had decided in her own mind was the victim to some vile, bad treatment, and herself as innocent as an unborn babe.

"I shall enjoy a cup of tea," she said to herself as she closed the garden gate, and ascended a couple of steps to ring the front door bell. The sound died away, and dead silence ensued. "What's keeping Jane?" asked Mrs. Wingrove as she waited. "If she knew how dead beat I am after all the weeks in the house she'd hurry up!" Again she tugged at the bell, a rousing peal this time, and again silence succeeded, but not such unbroken silence.

Oakley Road was a very quiet street, and in the hush a faint wail caught Mrs. Wingrove's accustomed ears.

"Bless my heart," she said aloud in the excitement of the moment, "if that dear infant isn't screaming his lungs out!"

She descended into the garden, and looking up saw that both the drawing-room windows were open.

"Why, goodness gracious, what can have happened! Could some burglarious villain have got in and murdered them both for the sake of Mrs. Brown's rings?"

"Well,

"No; but, a lot sometimes, and one hears of such have great faith in London. I wish I could see a policeman do not remember the gate, and looking up and down Tottenham Court Road, of course, they are never in the way

"Yes'm," hesitatingly. "The door and rang again and again, I was not out at the same time."

sitting down on the steps to rest at intervals. Half an hour or more passed in this distressing exercise. (It seemed full three hours to Mrs. Wingrove.) The child's wail died away and began again.

"The precious lamb! It's the cry of hunger! Whatever shall I do?"

She rose from her hard seat and looked distractedly about, when to her mingled wrath and relief she beheld the well-known figure of Jane approaching—Jane flushed, heated, dusty, breathless.

"Why Jane, Jane Dowty, my goodness gracious, however did you go out and leave those poor creatures by themselves! There's no sign of life in the house. It's my belief that some ruffian has got in and murdered the dear lady."

"I couldn't help it, ma'am, indeed I couldn't," cried Jane. "I went to get a cure the doctor recommended. Here he wrote down the name himself on his own card, and Mrs. Brown she sent me to a particular chemist in New Oxford Street, but find it I could not. It seems there never was one in that particular bit of the way, and I had to go miles to find another, and the 'buses was all nil. I'm quite at my wit's end, and law!—there's that blessed baby screaming."

"Jane Dowty, have you the latchkey?" said her mistress tragically.

"Yes'm, that I have," producing it, and struggling to put it into the keyhole, but her hands trembled too much.

"Give it to me," cried Mrs. Wingrove. The next moment they entered the house. Jane flew to the kitchen and seized the baby's bottle, adding some hot

water in furious haste to the mixture, and flew up-stairs with it to allay the infant's pangs of hunger propping it up cunningly so that she could leave the little creature to imbibe, while she joined her mistress in a hasty but minute examination of the premises.

They found nothing disturbed. Everything was in its proper place, with two exceptions, but they were important—no sign save a few knotted ends of cord and a luggage label inscribed "Mrs. Brown" was to be seen of their lodger, and her large dress basket was gone. All the rather elaborate array of combs and brushes, pin cushions, powder boxes, which used to adorn her dressing-table had vanished. Wardrobe, hanging cupboard, chest of drawers, all stood open and were absolutely empty, save one shelf, which contained the deserted baby's simple and rather inefficient layette.

The two women had pursued their search in silence. Having left no corner unexamined, they dropped each into a chair, and gazing at each other ejaculated by a common impulse.

"She's gone!"

CHAPTER II.

"WAIT a bit!" cried Jane, starting to her feet with sudden energy. "Did you come back in a cab, ma'am?"

"No, that I didn't, Jane."

"Well, I made sure you did, for as I came up to the gate, I see the marks of wheels as had turned round just opposite the gate." She left the room with a speed her stiff, angular figure did not promise, and returned before Mrs. Wingrove could wonder where she was going. "Just as I thought, ma'am; there's the mark of the wheels; the road is soft, and, more, there's the mark of big, muddy shoes on my clean steps! Oh! dear ma'am, let's look in the pantry cupboard!—your cupboard, and see if the plate is right."

"Jane Dowty," said Mrs. Wingrove, "if I am robbed and plundered, and that sweet infant starved into a premature grave, it's all along of you! What were my last words to you this day as I left the kitchen? Don't you stir out, Jane, till I come back—there's nothing to go for."

"No more there wasn't, ma'am," began Jane, with a catch in her voice, which presaged tears; "till Mrs. Brown was that bad with her head, that she begged and prayed me to go and fetch the stuff for her, and there it is on the hall table."

"Where's the use of mentioning the hall table? That's in a way prevaricating."

"And," continued Jane, sobbing, "Mrs. Brown promised to explain."

"Mrs. Brown will never explain nothing no more to you or to me!" broke in Mrs. Wingrove, shaking her head, and little knowing she was a true prophet. "It's no good crying and blowing your nose, Jane, the mischief is done, and I don't envy you your conscience! But I have made up my mind I will not be saddled with that dear baby! I am as good-natured as anyone, but I will not be imposed upon. I shall put him in the Union to-morrow."

Here Jane's sobs became hysterical. "No, ma'am, no! You'll never do no such thing. To think of the dear, unoffending infant, as couldn't help being born—(and I'm sure it's no great privilege)—being given to those cruel hags in the Union, as do their best to make away with the poor little souls! No, ma'am, you'll never do such a cruel thing, if I know you! Why, I'd rather keep him myself, poor as I am, and put him out to nurse—I would!"

"Don't talk nonsense, Jane." There was a touch of softness in Mrs. Wingrove's voice. "You'd best think of providing for your own old age! And now what is to be done?"

"I suppose there's no use in speaking to the police, ma'am?"

"Not a bit! Moreover, I don't want to make a noise and a scandal, and let all the world know how I've been made a fool of! Oh, Jane! What will the doctor say?"

"He'll scold all round, I'm thinking. He always did doubt Mrs. Brown."

"Yes, when we seemed to believe in her; other ways he'd talk as if we were the cruellest, most suspicious parties as ever let rooms! I'm sure I have every respect for Dr. Macnab, but he is a contradictory sort of a man! But we must let him know. Don't take your bonnet off, Jane; just run round and ask him to step up. Don't let on to Rogers what has happened. I'll have some tea ready by the time you come back."

"Thank you, ma'am; I shall be glad of a cup."

"Just see, that poor deserted lamb has finished every drop of his bottle and dropped off to sleep—fairly worn out with crying. How a mother could leave such a sweet angel is what I cannot understand! Now go, Jane."

But when Jane reached the doctor's house, which was only a short way off, he had not yet returned from his round of professional visits—she could therefore do no more than leave a guarded message that Mrs. Wingrove would be glad if he could look in before night.

The two bewildered women grew calmer over their tea. The baby woke up, and as if the poor little mite knew it had better win friends for itself, it made the pleasant, gurgling noises in which babies sometimes indulge, and took an amount of "notice" that quite fascinated its two admirers.

"Sometimes I think she'll never keep away from this pretty dear!" said Mrs. Wingrove reflectively, shaking her head with elephantine playfulness at the smiling infant.

"So do I, ma'am," echoed Jane, who understood to whom the "she" applied. "God only knows what it was obliged her to steal off in that way."

"That's true, Jane, but she need not have taken her box! and she had no letters of any kind or description, since she came here—nor could she, without us knowing. Still, I don't despair—law, Jane! There's the front door bell; it's Doctor Macnab! I declare I am all of a tremble. Light the gas in the front parlor, and put him in there!"

"Well, and what's the matter now?" was the doctor's greeting when Mrs. Wingrove presented herself. "Mrs. Brown was all right this morning, except for a nervous headache, eh? What's happened?" stopping short at the sight of Mrs. Wingrove's dismal face. He was both cross and tired after a long day's work.

"Mrs. Brown is gone, sir! That's what's happened! Gone, bag and baggage, not a rag left behind except the poor child's clothes."

Doctor Macnab stared at her for a moment in silence.

"Gone!" he exclaimed at length—in a high key of utter astonishment. "Why? How was it you were such a fool as to let her go?"

"How was I to help it, when she had the house to herself for a full hour, while Jane was away looking for that stuff for the headache you sent her for."

"Who? me? I never sent her. I mean not while you were out—'go for it as soon as Mrs. Wingrove comes back' were my words. Didn't I always warn you to keep a sharp lookout after your interesting lodger? But women are so easily hoodwinked, and

you were so taken up about the fine rings she wore (paste probably), and a five pound note here and there, that in spite of appearances (and never were appearances more against a woman) you believed her to be an angel of light."

"You believed in her just as much yourself, Doctor!" retorted Mrs. Wingrove stoutly. "When I was uneasy about them sovereigns I asked you to test for me, didn't you say that women were the most narrowly-suspicious creatures, and that if we knew the truth——"

"Oh! well never mind that," he interrupted, "I am awfully sorry this has happened. I only fear you may have a lot of trouble. What have you done? What steps have you taken?"

"What could I do, Doctor? I came back from the agent's office and found the house empty. Jane away, and that poor child screaming fit to split his throat!"

"You should have consulted the police; they might have put you on Mrs. Brown's track. Why, she must have gone out to call a cab herself, and not an hour before she was telling me she hardly felt equal to step into a Victoria. I thought though I had never seen her look so well. It was the first time she had put on a regular, well-fitting dress. It was a dark tweed thing; quite fit to travel in. By George! she has sold us all, and left the baby on your hands. Of course, you'll send the brat to the workhouse."

"Of course I shall," said Mrs. Wingrove severely, "but I'll trouble you not to call him a brat. He might be the son of a prince to look at him."

"His looks won't feed him, nor educate him, nor

clothe him, Mrs. Wingrove! Take my advice, pack him off to the 'House' to-morrow."

"Begging your pardon, sir, I will not. I will just wait a day or two till he is a trifle stronger, and better able to digest his food before I give him into the hands of those heartless paupers that have the poisoning of the poor infants in the 'House.'"

Doctor Macnab took a turn to and fro.

"And didn't she, Mrs. Brown, I mean, leave a line, a direction of any kind, eh?"

"Not a screed, not the scrape of a pen."

"Well, I must say I did not expect it of her," cried the doctor, in an irresistible burst of confidence. "Have you looked well through her rooms?"

"Bless you, yes, sir! in every corner."

"Would you mind my walking through them?"

"No, certainly not, Doctor."

They proceeded up-stairs, and Doctor Macnab examined every bit of furniture with the minutest care, but not a trace of the departed was left.

Mrs. Wingrove, with a melancholy shake of the head, went to turn off a gas burner at the side of the mantle-shelf, when her eye was attracted by a bright-colored paper hand-screen which had fallen forward, as if blown down when the windows were open. She raised it and uttered a shrill exclamation of surprise.

"Goodness gracious, Doctor! Look here."

"A parcel addressed to you! Open it at once."

"My name is printed on the cover!" said Mrs. Wingrove, beginning to undo the blue twine which bound it.

"Printed with pen and ink," said the doctor, looking closer.

The little parcel contained several envelopes, each bearing a name. That addressed to Mrs. Wingrove was very thick and heavy, one was for the Doctor, one for Jane.

Macnab soon tore open his. It contained three sovereigns, and a card inscribed, "With best thanks and apologies; this is all I can spare!"

"What have you got?" he asked, eagerly.

Mrs. Wingrove opened her envelope with maddening deliberation. In it were seven pounds in gold, with these words: "Nearly all I owe, so far as I can calculate. Good-by, God bless you!" Within was another little parcel, inscribed, "To use for the boy." This contained ten sovereigns, and two rings, one of fine emeralds and diamonds, the other an old-fashioned one of marquise shape; a large diamond was in the center, and the rest filled up with small brilliants. On the paper in which these were wrapped was written: "Have patience. Do not cast him from you. You shall have further help as I can manage. Name the boy 'Hugh.'"

"Gad! this is most extraordinary!" ejaculated the doctor. "She is not so bad after all! Let me look at these rings. This diamond and emerald one is worth a pretty penny; and, see here, there are letters inside this old one."

He held it to the light. "Ah! Italian, evidently; 'Sempre l'isstessa,' that is 'always the same.' One might trace something from this."

"Oh, Doctor, but I am thankful that poor lady thought of her sweet baby! Now I am sure she will come back for him! I had a sort of idea she would,

though it looked at first as if she had deserted him. I'll not send him to the 'House' now. Later on we might get him into some institution; and I'll keep the rings, both of them, for him until some rainy day. Dear, dear! She must have come here with a good bit of money, and (feeling it) there's a sovereign or two for Jane in this envelope. Come along down, Doctor. Jane will be pleased. Then I must lock up the dear child's money. I'll take good care of it, I promise you."

In effect Jane's envelope contained a sovereign and a half; so Jane proceeded to wash and undress baby in a very cheerful mood, and disposed to think his mother an injured saint.

"It's a queer business, a very queer business," mused the doctor, as he comforted himself with a glass of whisky toddy before turning in, for he had walked home in a heavy thunderous downpour. "I don't feel at all disposed to think that we'll ever hear more about her. Gad! what a beautiful woman she is, and a lady, ay, but no heart, or she couldn't leave that kid of hers. Faith, if I had an infant like that, I should be a bit of a fool about him myself."

Pulling his pipe and tobacco jar to him the doctor proceeded to dream and smoke. He was a bachelor, and no great admirer of the "fair sex." But the idea of "home" was attractive, of a reasonable wife, who could manage a house, and two or three bright-eyed children, to keep him young and give him something to live for, to work for! It was a pleasant picture.

Then he mentally reviewed the various young ladies of his acquaintance, and picked holes in all of them.

"Women are kittle cattle! Very few men are their match, but I'll not give up Mrs. Brown just yet. Let me see, my friend Mrs. Wingrove is so certain sure she had no communications with the outside. I suppose she hadn't—ergo; she must have called the cab herself. The stand is not far from the end of the road. Then that big basket box of hers would need two men to lift it. She must have had the cabby and a loafer. It will go hard with me, but I'll find one or the other. I'll do my own detective work. The professional detective is a dull dog! Oakley Road is not the sort of place cabs hang about in search of a job, and the stand is quite near—long way for her to walk though." He took out his memorandum-book and glanced at his list of engagements. "Um! Old Farley, 12, Bentinck Terrace; that's only a few hundred yards beyond the stand; I'll take it on my way."

The doctor was true to his purpose, but failed in finding any trace of the fugitive. None of the Jehu's who drove "growlers" could give him any information. Hansoms were, of course, out of the question. However, a one-eyed waterman saw that three of the cabs which frequented the "rank" were absent, and one of these might have been the vehicle of which he was in search—"if the gentleman had only taken the number?"

That the gentleman, unfortunately, had not done. Macnab said he had been commissioned to find a man who had taken up a lady close by, and had been so civil and obliging that she wished to send him a tip, but her change had run short; as, however, he did not know the number of the cab he would only give it to the man who could describe the lady.

On the strength of this story the doctor got what he wanted a couple of days after.

As he was walking past to see his Bentinck Terrace patient, a rough-looking elderly cabby, who was hanging a bag on his horse's nose, suddenly stepped up to him—

"Beg pardon, sir, you was asking for a man as took up a lady Tuesday last, nigh here?"

"Yes, I was, my man!"

"Well, sir, I did. It was between two and three; I had been standing idle near all the morning when one of them sort of fellers as runs after cabs to help with the luggage comes up, and, says he, 'Come along, cabby, lady wants a conveyance; follow me!' So I did to a house this end of the Oakley Road, and there stood a lady, a tall, grand-looking lady, at the gate. She says very gentle, but a bit foreign-like, 'Will you please assist this man to carry down my box?' 'I would, mum,' says I, 'only the p'leece won't allow me to leave my 'oss.' She looked at the beast, an', ses she, 'I think he is likely to stand.'

"'That he will, mum,' ses I.

"'Then will you risk it for me,' she made answer so pleasant that I said 'here goes.' She showed us the way to a bedroom at the back, and there was a big basket box, wasn't it heavy though! Anyhow we got it down, the lady following with a traveling-bag in her hand. I don't think there was a soul in the house but herself. She shut the door after her, and latched the gate carefully. Then she says, 'The Great Northern Station, if you please;' with that she tipped the man as called me, tipped him well, I'm thinking, for he

touched his cap and said 'Thank you, mum.' I druv to the Station and as I got down to help with the luggage I heard her ask the porter when the next train for Edinburgh started. I didn't quite make out what he said, but the lady answered, 'I can leave my luggage here, at all events;' with that she stepped out of the cab and paid me fair and 'andsome, then she went after the porter and her box, through the door, and I druv away."

"Thanks!" returned Macnab, "I'm much obliged. There's a couple of shillings for you. It's always well to be obliging."

"Thank'ee, sir; hope the lady got down all right."

"Yes, all right!" and the doctor walked on, reflecting on the small amount he had learned by his careful questioning, for cabby's speech was not causative. Everything had happened as might have been imagined, and not a glimmer of light had been thrown on the escape of the delinquent.

As to her going to Edinburgh, she might just as well have gone to Timbuctoo! What was to prevent her taking her luggage across to the arrival platform, and starting thence to the ends of the earth? He never considered "Mrs. Brown" as anything but a "nom de guerre," "though, after all," he thought, "there is no reason why 'Mrs. Brown' should not be an elegant, lovely woman! I didn't think I should be such a fool as to be so hurt by her leaving that baby of hers! but I did not think her capable of it! I fear she has vanished in toto! It is rough on Mrs. Wingrove! But I'd lay long odds that she'll never part with that boy, and he? He'll probably live to ruin

and desert her, so injuries are generally paid back, but to the innocent! There is a cussedness in the affairs of men! Well, it's not my task to try and put the world straight; my business is to keep my head above water, and increase my practise; at thirty-two I ought to have a bigger one, a conclusion which brought him to his patient's door.

As Doctor Macnab anticipated, when next he found a spare quarter of an hour to bestow on his friend Mrs. Wingrove, he found her mind quite made up on the question of adopting the deserted infant.

"You see, Doctor," she said, "that unfortunate lady has left me ten pounds and two fine rings to provide for the dear child. I have accepted them, so I feel bound to keep him as long as that money lasts. I don't know, of course, how much the rings may be worth; may be, sir, you will be good enough to find out for me."

"Certainly, with pleasure. I have a very respectable jeweler among my patients, and he will give me a pretty correct notion."

"Anyway, sir, they'll not be worth less than twenty pounds for the two, and I am inclined to think that before that's all gone I'll hear something of Mrs. Brown. Indeed, Jane is quite sure we shall; and she is a very shrewd far-seeing woman."

"Anyway, she has faith enough to remove mountains. Then you do not intend to make any further effort to trace this adventuress, who has thrown the burden of her unfortunate child on you?"

"No, Doctor, I shall not. I don't want to bring more grief and pain on that poor woman if she is good,

and if she is bad—why—she doesn't deserve to have the spoiling of that sweet infant's life."

"Curious reasoning, Mrs. Wingrove. I believe your wisest plan for yourself would be to send the boy to the workhouse, and give the money and rings to be kept for his use, to the Poor Law Guardians, or whoever the proper person might be. However, you are a free agent, you must do as you like."

"Yes, Doctor, and so I shall," returned Mrs. Wingrove. "I don't know as I ever could have brought myself to part with the dear lamb; anyhow, I am going to have him christened on Thursday, and would you, sir (you'll excuse the liberty), be so kind and helpful as to stand godfather? You see, there must be two godfathers for a boy, so I wrote to a cousin of mine, who has a small nursery-garden in Hertfordshire, to be one. He'll not need to come, the Clerk will be his proxy, and if you'll be so good, I'll be the god-mother. Then it'll be all right, and we'll name him Hugh."

"Bless my soul, Mrs. Wingrove! this is a most unexpected attack! How can you think I will undertake such responsibilities?"

"Well, sir, it's past ten years since we were first acquainted, and I believe I was one of the first as ever sent for you after you set up in Laburnam Lodge. You'll remember the West Indian gentleman who was dying for eighteen months in my house, and no one came a next or nigh him, save yourself, and then that delicate young lady and her mother——"

"Gad! Mrs. Wingrove! one would think you had made my fortune!" interrupted the doctor.

"No, it's not that, sir."

"Never mind," persisted Doctor Macnab, "I'll do this bit of service to the poor child, not out of gratitude to you, but as a sort of atonement because I brought him safely into life, instead of strangling him en route, which would probably have been a good deal kinder!"

"How can we tell? For all you know, Doctor, the good God may mean him to be a great man yet?"

"May be so, Mrs. Wingrove. So far he is lucky in having fallen into your hands. I trust you will not have cause to regret your kindness."

So Mrs. Wingrove and Jane retained the "precious lamb," and whatever of good or evil lay behind the curtain of the future, for the present they were amply rewarded by the delight and interest they both took in the little human waif thus strangely thrown upon their hands.

Gathering themselves together after this stunning experience they cleaned the house energetically from top to bottom; they put up cards afresh in each front window, and considerably before the precious lamb was short-coated, the comfortable, well-ordered house was well filled, and the old life going on as if no mysterious and angelic visitor from above or below had ever alighted there and left a blessing behind.

CHAPTER III.

THE years slipped noiselessly away. "Baby" came triumphantly through the trials of vaccination, teething, and even a sharp bout with measles. He was now more than five years old, and attended a "Kindergarten" school close by his "grannie's" (as he called her).

His mother had made no sign, she seemed lost forever. Indeed, in their inmost hearts, neither Mrs. Wingrove nor Jane wished for her reappearance. Little Hugh had become as their own, and to give him up would have been pain and grief to them.

Mrs. Wingrove was grayer and older-looking, but her face was softer and happier than it had been when we first saw her, though in all matters that appertained to money-making she was keener than ever.

In the previous spring, when the deserted child was not yet through the first half of his fifth year, Mrs. Wingrove had been startled by a loud ring at the front door as a February evening was closing in. Jane went quickly to answer the summons, and found no visitor, but a thick brown envelope in the letter-box. It bore Mrs. Wingrove's name, but no address. On opening it, she found two pieces of cardboard, between which were stitched twenty sovereigns. The words, "For the boy," were written on this enclosure in a round formal hand.

This mysterious gift excited Mrs. Wingrove greatly, and she flew to her chief counselor, Dr. Macnab.

That gentleman's practise had increased almost to his own satisfaction, and it was not so easy to secure an interview with him as it used to be.

"Hey! This looks like the mother coming to the front again," was his exclamation. "She calculates that you must be getting out of funds."

"I suppose so, sir. I am sure I'm thankful she thinks of the poor dear child, but I'd rather she did not come back to take away what she did not think worth the trouble of rearing."

"I hope the youngster will reward you one day for your goodness, Mrs. Wingrove. By the way, why don't you sell those rings? You'd get sixty or seventy pounds for them, and you might fund the money, as a stand-by."

"I'll do it, Doctor, and add the interest to the money. I'll just ask my stockbroker's advice about it," said Mrs. Wingrove, with much dignity.

"Lucky woman to have a stockbroker! Yes, do. I hope he isn't a rogue!"

"I have no reason to think so, sir," stiffly.

"Rooms all let?"

"Yes, sir. I have a Royal Navy captain and his daughter in my drawing-rooms, as occupy four rooms; very nice people, say they'll stay over the winter, and a lady in this dining-room (I just had you shown in here, sir, for Jane is turning out my own parlor this morning, and Miss Selby is gone to the City. She is such a quiet lady, not a bit of trouble. She was recommended to me by the Dean of Ballybrack, who

used to stay here during the May meetings, when he was only the Rev. Dr. O'Flynn. I think she is looking out for something to do. She writes such a lot of letters."

"God help her!" said the doctor heartily. "Now tell me, Mrs. Wingrove, how is the boy going on."

"Couldn't be better, sir. I wish he were at home, but I send him to a children's school round the corner. He eats like a Trojan, and though he has a bit of an obstinate temper he is wonderfully good on the whole."

"I suspect you and Jane——"

The door opening interrupted him, and a good deal to his annoyance, a lady walked in. A tall, slight lady with very gray hair, which, contrasting with a fine, fresh brunette complexion and intelligent bright dark eyes, suggested hair-powder rather than advancing years. She wore a very sedate but becoming bonnet and a black dress, a slight mourning costume, which suited her well.

"Oh, Miss Selby, ma'am, I do beg your pardon! Doctor Macnab just calling on business, I took the liberty of asking him in here."

"Oh, yes, of course," returned Miss Selby, with a smile which showed a set of small, strong, white teeth. "Don't apologize. I have returned suddenly because I stupidly forgot some papers of importance. Do not disturb yourself. I shall just take them, and go on my way." She spoke in a pleasant, though rather high-pitched, voice, and her accent was refined. She bent her head graciously and went away to her bedroom. The front door closing immediately afterwards

told Mrs. Wingrove and the doctor that she had again left the house.

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed the former. "To think of her coming back again just when I had brought you in."

"Your Miss Selby is an uncommon nice-looking woman; she isn't old either. Why is her hair so gray?"

"The Lord knows! Grief, or a shock, or bad health, or——"

"Oh, she looks cheerful enough as to health. Why she is the picture of health."

"Well, may be so, Doctor."

"I must be going. Now Mrs. Wingrove, if you would care to trust me with those rings I think I could get my friend that jeweler to take them or sell them to greater advantage than you could!"

"I'm sure, sir, I am ever so much obliged to you, and I'll bring you the emerald and diamond ring this minute; as to that funny-shaped one, with the words inside it, why, somehow I do not feel inclined to part with that. It might help the poor dear boy to find his people some day."

"Ah, Mrs. Wingrove, I see you are building up a romance about that poor little waif! Don't deceive yourself. His best chance is to pose as your adopted son."

"Grandson you mean, sir!" said Mrs. Wingrove as she left the room to get the ring.

"Shall I give you a receipt for it?" asked Doctor Macnab.

"Lord no, sir," she returned smiling, and they shook hands quite cordially.

"That Miss—what did she call her?—Selby, is a deuced nice-looking woman!" mused the doctor as he walked briskly towards his surgery. "Looks as if she had brains under that gray hair of hers. I'd like to talk to her, but I suppose there's no chance of that. I wonder what sort of employment she's looking for? Companion! That's the dodge with the ladylike women, who never learned anything useful in their lives, and then come to grief, or their people come to grief. Gad! I wouldn't mind marrying a woman like that, if she wouldn't turn up her nose at an ordinary general practitioner of my sort. She can't be very young, twenty-eight or thirty. I'm rising thirty-eight myself, so she's quite young enough for me. I am an idiot to be taken bad in this way," and he opened his pocketbook to glance at some notes he had made of a rather difficult case, which was next on his list of visits, and which effectually put Miss Selby out of his head.

But "Coming events cast their shadows before."

Time sped on, and Miss Selby was still occupying Mrs. Wingrove's "Dining rooms," not having succeeded in finding any berth, when one day, towards the end of April, near the hour at which she usually returned to her evening meal of tea and an egg, or toast without an egg, a cab drove up, from which Miss Selby alighted feebly, and with the help of the cabby.

"Law, bless me, something has happened!" ejaculated Jane, who was setting the tea things, and she rushed to the door.

"My goodness! what has happened, miss? You look awful bad."

"Not worse than I feel, Jane," said Miss Selby, with a cheerful smile, though she was white and tremulous. "I was bowled over in Piccadilly by a hansom, and I am afraid my right arm is broken. Here is my purse; pay the driver for me, and I had better see a doctor as soon as possible."

"Yes, sure, miss. Mrs. Brusham, the charwoman, is here. I'll tell her to run round to Dr. Macnab, and you had better get your clothes off, and be in bed by the time he comes, that he may examine you. How do you know but you may have other hurts, miss?"

"I don't think I have. This is enough, Heaven knows," and Miss Selby bit her lips, for she was in great pain, and much bruised.

"I'll run and tell Mrs. Wingrove, miss, to send off Mrs. Brusham. She'd better say you think you have broke your arm."

Mrs. Wingrove quickly made her appearance, and deftly and tenderly assisted the sufferer to undress.

They had hardly got her to bed when the Doctor arrived, with an ominous-looking black bag.

He soon corroborated Miss Selby's suspicions. The right arm was broken.

"It has been left rather long without treatment," said the doctor, as he skilfully set the injured limb, and fixed the splints. "You stay quiet in your bed for the rest of the day, and try to sleep. I will send you a calmant as soon as I get back. The great point is to avoid feverishness, and keep the general health in good order."

"How long will it be before I can write?" she asked,

"Oh! a fortnight or three weeks. Your fingers will be a bit rusty after the arm is all right."

"It's very unlucky!" she said, wearily. "After three months' search for employment, I had just found what was fairly suitable, and now I must give it up, for the people who wanted me are going abroad, and wished for me immediately."

"Yes, that's bad! We must get you well as soon as possible. Could I write to any friends for you?" added the doctor kindly. She hesitated a moment, and then said:

"Thank you, no. My sister is the wife of a country clergyman, and has a large family to attend to. We are not frequent correspondents, so I will not tell her of this misadventure until I am nearly well."

"You'll find Mrs. Wingrove quite a capable nurse. I have known her for a long time."

"I am sure she is, but with so slight a hurt I shall not want nursing."

"Then I'll look in to-morrow and see how you are getting on."

"Thank you, Doctor, but," coloring quickly, "do not trouble to come often. I am a very conscientious patient, and will obey orders faithfully."

"I understand," he returned laughing, "but for a week you must give me a free hand."

The week over, Dr. Macnab's visits did not diminish in number, and Jane who was a person of much observation, said to her mistress: "Law, 'm, how smart the doctor has grown!"

"Has he, Jane? I didn't notice."

"I'm surprised you didn't then. Why, he has a new

light-colored overcoat and a silk hat, to say nothing of a pair of tan gloves stitched with black, as he can hardly get off or on, and have you seen the lot of books and papers he brings Miss Selby?"

"Why, what are you driving at, Jane?"

"Well, I dunno myself what I think, but if they weren't doctor and patient, 'm, I would say they were 'keeping company.'"

"Oh, go along with you, Jane! You should not be thinking such rubbish at your age."

"It's because I have seen a good bit at my age as I do be thinking such things, 'm," and Jane resumed her cleaning of what she termed "the silver" in dignified silence.

Meantime Dr. Macnab, whose perception and sympathy had seldom been roused to such activity, divined the reason of Miss Selby's slight embarrassed efforts to discourage his visits, and determined to set his patient's mind at rest as regarded them.

"I have quite a large parcel of books to return to you, Doctor," said Miss Selby about ten days after her accident. "I will send them back this evening."

"Oh, don't you trouble yourself, I'll come here tomorrow and take them myself."

"They have been a perfect God-send! I do not know how I should have got through this weary time without them, but—but, Doctor, I should be an impostor if I let you bestow so many precious visits on me which are needed elsewhere, when I am nearly quite well."

"If you think my visits are all professional you are quite mistaken. Once a week is the outside of what's

necessary. Pray am I never to have the comfort of a little rational talk?"

"Oh, really," began Miss Selby, but the doctor raised his hand with a pleading gesture.

"Pray hear me. I think I may venture to speak frankly to you. I am not going to bring you in a big bill because I enjoy talking to you. You shall pay for every professional visit and every phial of physic you have had, don't be afraid, but why should I deny myself a bit of a treat for the sake of punctilio. Look here, Miss Selby, you are the first companionable woman I have ever met! Don't fancy I'm an idiot to turn up my nose at women because they haven't mathematical minds. There's a hundredweight of gold to the ton of commonplace mixed up in their nature, but it's the tons one comes most in contact with. Now I may be taking a liberty in saying it, for I am an uncouth chap, and I do hope you'll excuse me; but I must say I can talk to you as I could to a fellow of my own age and sex. Indeed, I'm not sure you haven't a wider view of life than I have."

"My dear Doctor, it is an exquisite compliment," cried Miss Selby, laughing good-humoredly, "and compliments have been rare plums in my cake. I ought to know life pretty well, for I have been battling with it for more than sixteen years, ever since my sister and I were left orphans by the death of my father, when she was seventeen, and I was fifteen, with no money, and scarcely any education. She went as a teacher in a big school, and had a hard enough life. Mine was a trifle worse as nursery governess in a private family. My father was a commander in the Navy,

but ill-able to take care of himself, poor dear. So you see being ill-armed for the conflict I drifted into the nebulous region of undefined employment, and became that most uncertain of officials, 'a lady companion.'"

"That must be an infernal sort of occupation."

"It is pretty bad sometimes; on the whole I haven't so much to complain of. I was for ten years with Lady Caroline Collingwood, and in her house I saw a great deal. She was not unkind, but rather tiresome, and huffy. She died last December, and was good enough to leave me a small legacy. It is keeping me going at present, until I find another engagement, so you see how specially unfortunate this accident has been."

"I do," said Dr. Macnab, shortly, and fell into a brown study.

"I suppose you have lost the engagement you mentioned?" he resumed after a brief pause.

"Oh, yes! If you only knew the crowds of half-educated, ill-equipped women who, year after year, are cast out of fairly comfortable homes into the wild waves of Life's turbulent ocean, to struggle for existence, you might form some idea of the numbers who strive for every little appointment which offers even half a loaf."

A pause ensued, and then the Doctor remarked:—

"I should fancy you had a better chance than most."

"Why?" asked Miss Selby, smiling.

"Because you look strong and bright and healthy."

"I hope you may be a true prophet," she returned, "Meanwhile I shall ask you to do me a small service."

"Name it," he returned.

Miss Selby rose and brought him pen and ink and paper.

"I want you to answer this note for me." She laid before him a black-edged epistle, which ran thus:—

"DEAR LOTTIE,—I arrived in Town yesterday, and found your note. Of course, after the great grief I have suffered so lately, I am unfit to do anything or help anyone, yet I should be glad to do what I could for you. If you will call here the day after to-morrow we might talk matters over. Life has been one long trial to me; some people have only sunshine.

"Yours sincerely,

"HARRIET HAZELHURST."

"What am I to say?" asked the doctor.

"DEAR LADY HAZELHURST,—Many thanks for yours. I cannot accept your kind invitation to call for I have met with an accident, and broken my right arm. I am as yet unable to go out alone.

"Sincerely sympathizing with your great sorrow,

"I am yours very truly,

"CHARLOTTE SELBY."

"Thank you very much," said Miss Selby, glancing at the lines. "Now please address it 'the Viscountess Hazelhurst, St. George's Place, S. W.'" Lady Hazelhurst is Lady Caroline Collingwood's only daughter. She married Lord Hazelhurst six or seven years ago. We were very good friends; she had a large fortune, and was very hard to please. Lord Hazelhurst died in September last."

"I suppose a woman with a lot of money thinks she has a right to a first-rate article!" said Dr. Macnab as he closed the note. "Now I'll post this for you, for I must be off. To-morrow I'll pay you a regular professional visit, and bring some more books; you get through them at a devil of a pace. You had better go out this afternoon, it is a lovely day, and your pulse is stronger and steadier. A stroll along these quiet roads is a different matter from buffeting the crowds at Hyde Park Corner."

"It is, indeed," returned Miss Selby, giving him her left hand, which he noticed was fine and well shaped. Then he picked up his books and departed.

Miss Selby stood looking after him for a moment, and then laughed softly. "He is not handsome, certainly," she thought, "but he has a kind, resolute, sensible face. I have had a good deal of love made to me of different sorts, but I'm afraid there was little of the original article in it! Now, my dear doctor does not make love, but he likes me as a comrade; that is nice, and a more lasting kind of regard. I wonder what Lady Hazelhurst wants? She is not half bad! Heigho! I wish I had a home, a real home, where I should be at rest, and arrange it in my own way, and cook little dishes, dainty dishes in my own kitchen! Cooking dainty dishes implies a husband to cook for. I should not trouble to do them for myself, and then it would be charming to have a little conservatory, and make everything nice and pretty at the smallest possible cost. This is a very different day-dream from what I used to indulge in when I first entered Lady Caroline's service, for I was in service,

but it is quite pleasant enough to charm me now. I wonder if Lady Hazelhurst will come and see me? If she wants anything very much she will. It is dreadfully exhausting to sit idle. I can neither work nor write, nor even tidy away things. I don't wonder that idlers are inveterate gossips. I'm sure I should be thankful to talk with poor old Mrs. Brusham rather than sit here silent, with my hands before me."

Miss Selby's conjectures touching Lady Hazelhurst were answered in the affirmative by her appearance on the following Saturday afternoon.

It was a chill, drizzling wintry day, and Mrs. Wingrove's adopted grandson was not sent out for his usual Saturday treat, a walk in Regent's Park, with a young girl who had been added to the establishment as an assistant to Jane. He was, therefore, admitted to Miss Selby's room. She had often noticed him, and had given him a book of nursery rhymes, brilliantly illustrated, which he greatly enjoyed hearing her read aloud.

He was a bright, intelligent child, and highly pleased to fetch and carry for Miss Selby, who had a great fascination for children.

He was always well dressed and well cared for, but not spoiled. Miss Selby was much interested in the deserted child, whose curious history had been detailed to her by Mrs. Wingrove. The little fellow was trotting to and fro, carrying books and papers from one room to another, very happy and busy, when there was the sound of wheels stopping at the gate, and in a few moments Jane announced:—

"A lady for you, miss."

Thereupon entered a small, slight figure, in deep mourning, a line of white cap under her bonnet marking the wearer as a widow.

"Lady Hazelhurst! This is very kind of you," said Miss Selby, rising and coming forward to meet her.

"I was quite shocked to hear of your accident," said Lady Hazelhurst, in a high, querulous voice. "I hope you are better. It is such an aggravation of everything your being laid up. I had been thinking that you were the very person to come with me to Caresford, and help me in all the weary work I have to do."

"I am very sorry both on your account and my own, that I cannot accept your invitation, at any rate, for some time. My arm is nearly all right again, but my fingers are stiff, very stiff, and I am generally out of sorts. I think of going down to my sister for rest and country air, so——"

Here the boy, who had been playing in and out of Miss Selby's bedroom, came trotting in, and, holding up an illustrated paper.

"May I have this big picky book, lady?" he cried, in his childish tones, which were unusually sweet and less shrill than children's generally are.

"What a handsome child!" exclaimed Lady Hazelhurst, struck by his appearance.

Little Hugh Brown was tall for his age, with abundant sunny fair hair, and big dark blue eyes that met yours steadily, fearlessly, a sweet but resolute mouth, and a complexion of softest pink and white. His movements were full of the grace which comes from

symmetry, and, altogether, a more fascinating little creature never charmed a mother's heart.

"Where does he come from?" continued Lady Hazelhurst.

"He is an orphan my landlady has adopted. She has no children of her own, and this boy has become the pride and joy of her heart."

"I don't wonder at it. Will you come and shake hands with me, dear?" continued her ladyship. The child complied at once with frank confidence, holding up his fair face to be kissed.

"What a well-mannered little fellow! Why, Lottie, he must be the son of a gentleman!"

"Yes, he looks as if he were. Run away, dear! You may take the pictures, and show them to grannie. Then cut them out, and we will put them in your book this evening, perhaps," said Miss Selby.

The child obeyed at once, saying politely, "Good-by, lady," before he left the room.

"Why, a duke might be proud of such a son and heir," exclaimed Lady Hazelhurst. "But about your coming to me. You know I must leave Caresford in about six weeks, and I have so many letters and papers to tear up and to regulate, bills to pay, and heaven knows what, that I must have help. It is too cruel that a widow should be turned out of her home as soon as she is bereaved of her husband, for you know Dick Neville might have taken possession some months ago (I mean Lord Hazelhurst). He has behaved very well, I must say, so I want to leave the place as soon as I can. When do you think you will be fit for work, you used to be such a help to

mamma? You might, at any rate, come for a few weeks; you know it would save your board and lodging. I don't think I shall want a companion when I take up my life again. Heigho! mine has been a sad lot. Though Hazelhurst was very charming, he was trying in some ways, and never really understood me. Then he had no idea of prudence or management."

"I really cannot make any arrangement just now, Lady Hazelhurst! You know I must look for a permanent engagement. Living on my own means is, I find, an exhausting process."

"Of course it is! I know that! But, Lottie, you ought not to be selfish! You always were a little, were you not?"

"I daresay I am not a fair judge of my own character, but I am under the impression that I am not!" returned Miss Selby, smiling.

"You know Richard, I mean Lord Hazelhurst, was my husband's nephew. He is rather crotchety, and declares that some of my jewels are heirlooms, which is quite a mistake, and I will certainly not give them up. He has miserable health, and is a bachelor, so what can he want with jewels? People are really terribly selfish and unreasonable!" And after a good deal of talk respecting her wrongs, and suffering, and her affairs, Lady Hazelhurst bid her mother's ex-companion good morning, begging her to consider the question of taking temporary service with herself.

CHAPTER IV.

"So, you are thinking of running away on Wednesday," said Doctor Macnab one evening, about a week later, when he looked in at "Laburnam Lodge" to pay an unprofessional visit to his patient. "I daresay a change will do you good. How long shall you be away?"

"Perhaps a fortnight. It will be a great treat to me; I am very fond of my nephews and nieces, though I am sorry they are so numerous."

"And you return here?"

She shook her head. "I hope to find something suitable before I return to town, and so avoid two changes. I do not want to join Lady Hazelhurst; she is rather an unsatisfactory task-mistress, though she honestly believes herself to be the most generous and unselfish of women."

"I know her sort! Tell me, are there any women who can be satisfactory in the relations of companion and companioned?"

Miss Selby reflected, "Not many," she said at last.

"Not many, I am afraid! You see it is a difficult position for both because of its indefiniteness, and indeed 'companions' are often very irritating, and disagreeable, sometimes the employer becomes the slave

of the employed, generally, however, the money power turns the scale."

"It would be better for you, I daresay, to be companion to a man."

"Certainly! For one reason, we should see less of each other. I should not object to act lady of the house to a widower with young daughters."

"How would a bachelor without any do?"

"Personally I should not mind," said Miss Selby, laughing. "But of course, that would not do!"

"You wouldn't mind, eh!" said the doctor, rising, walking to the window, and then back to the sofa, where his patient was sitting.

"Well," he began, then hesitated, wiped his brow, and recommenced.

"I was going to say, I know a—an engagement that might suit you, it's a bachelor, an uncouth sort of fellow, but you, you'd be queen of the place, and do what you like in every way—and——"

A hearty, pleasant laugh interrupted him.

"My dear doctor! I have a reputation to take care of! It is tempting, no doubt, but alas! it cannot be."

"Why not?" cried the doctor, suddenly restored to self-possession. "Of course the companionship I propose is for life! and I am the bachelor in question. Don't think me too presumptuous, but, as your lot is not so bright or prosperous as it ought to be, and at least I can offer you a comfortable home, where you shall have all the best I can give you, perhaps you'll consider the suggestion. I know you ought to have a higher position than I can offer."

"Stop, stop," interrupted Miss Selby, putting her hand to her brow. "Let me think——"

"That's just what I want you to do! You are the first woman I ever wished to marry, and I do wish it with all my soul and with all my strength. I think I could make you happy, though you deserve a better man than I am. I have been making a right good practise during the last five years, and,—if,—if you'll do me the honor to accept me, I'll,—I'll furnish my house new from top to bottom. I have just bought the rest of the lease (fifteen years), or I'd move, if you'd prefer another place. Indeed, that might be managed if you particularly wish it. In short, if you cannot agree to put up with a plain, honest chap like myself, I—I do not care to live."

"That is a very strong expression, Doctor Macnab. Life is pleasant and precious, even when the sunshine is scant, as it has been with me. Pray remember that I am poor and *passée*; a man in your position might easily find a bonnie young wife."

"I want no one but you! And you might marry a prince, to my thinking!"

"Unfortunately, a prince has never offered himself."

"Then perhaps there's a trifle better chance for the doctor?"

"This is a very serious matter, Doctor Macnab. You must give me a day or two to reflect. A perfectly disinterested offer such as yours deserves respectful consideration."

"Don't suppose I would venture to hurry you. Tell your sister, ask her advice. I'll just write you a

little statement of my hopes and wishes and finances
—and—

“Oh, I am quite my own mistress, and shall decide for myself.”

“And when may I come for my answer?”

“The day after to-morrow, or I will write and ask you to come.”

“Then I’ll go home and say my prayers!” exclaimed the doctor, piously. “Maybe luck will be with me.” He held out his hand, Miss Selby put hers into it, the Doctor ventured to raise it to his lips with an air of profound devotion, and left the room.

Miss Selby stood where he had left her for a minute in deep thought. Then a smile gradually overspread her countenance.

“I thought he liked me,” she mused, “but I did not think it was so real as this. Home, rest, certainty, these are strong inducements. Can I honestly accept them? Do I like him well enough to make him a good sympathetic wife? It is such a terribly close tie. He is a little uncouth; he is not conventionally well-bred; the modeling is rough, but the metal is good and sterling.”

Her eyes grew moist and her lips quivered slightly, “I’ve had rather a hard life. I could not have got through it had I not laughed away my tears when they tried to come, so people thought I had no feeling. That was both a spear and shield. Well, I will follow my admirer’s example, and say my prayers. My reverend brother-in-law thinks me a bit of a heathen—but—‘There is a Providence that shapes our ends.’”

She sank down on the sofa, and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, for a moment or two of perfect stillness.

The result of Miss Selby's meditations was, that the second day after the doctor's daring declaration, Mrs. Wingrove, happening to be in the hall when he was leaving the house, hastened to open the door for him.

"My word! Doctor," she exclaimed as her eyes met his, "you are looking bright! I would not give you more than twenty-seven, and I know you are more than ten years beyond that!"

"You are a shrewd observer, Mrs. Wingrove! I feel as if I had started life afresh, at about five-and-twenty."

"Well, I wonder at that, sir! and you going to lose your patient on Monday!"

"Oh! a change will do her all the good in the world, and of course she will come back to London; every one does. Good-by, Mrs. Wingrove. What a fine little chap your godson grows! We'll be obliged to bind him to a trade before we know where we are!"

"Indeed, Doctor, I'd like to get him a clerkship in some office, he's that clever!"

"Ah, we'll see, we'll see," and the doctor hurried away.

The Saturday before Miss Selby's departure was fine and warm, and as an extra treat to her little favorite Hugh, she took him out for a short walk, to the child's delight. He skipped about, and ran to and fro after the fashion of joyous childhood.

A few paces from the entrance of Laburnam Lodge

they met an old lady, a tall, slightly bent old lady, with white hair and spectacles. She wore an old-fashioned black satin bonnet, with a distinct crown, a large loose black silk and lace cloak, and a fine black lace veil hanging loosely over her face. She stopped when close to them, and said with a very foreign accent, "Pardon, Madame!" proceeding to ask her way to Regent's Park, in broken English. Miss Selby replied civilly. The old lady thanked her informant gracefully. Then looking at the child, she exclaimed, "You will excuse my admiration! *Le bon Dieu* has blessed you with a lovely boy. Shake hands with me, darling! What is your name?"

"Shake hands, dear," said Miss Selby.

The child immediately complied. "My name is Hugh," he said, gazing up into the Frenchwoman's eyes, as if attracted by her.

"That is a good child! I congratulate you, madame!"

"He is not mine!" said Miss Selby, laughing, "he is a little friend, who is taking a walk with me!"

"Ah! indeed. He seems well and strong—and—happy!"

"He is all three, I think, madame."

"May he ever be!" laying a hand on his shoulder, "God be with thee, fair child. You forgive me, *chère dame*?"

"I thank you," returned Miss Selby, gravely. The old lady bent her head with dignity, and passed on in the direction pointed out to her.

Soon little Hugh looked back, and exclaimed, "The lady has turned, she is looking after us, she kissed her hand to me, she is a nice lady, isn't she?"

"Yes, very nice. I wish she had someone to walk with her. It must be sad to be left alone when one is old," and perhaps Miss Selby thought she had done well in securing a life companion.

The boy was quite full of the adventure when he returned to the house, and described the old French lady very minutely to Jane.

"I am glad she said God bless you, my dearie, it's a good sign, and you must try to be a good boy, and not fight with your schoolmates," for, alas! the angelic-looking youngster was somewhat pugnacious when among his playfellows, and this was almost the only fault charged against him, yet he was by no means unpopular with his companions.

Mrs. Wingrove was too busy to listen, and the little incident was soon forgotten.

Both Mrs. Wingrove and her prime minister were very sorry to part with their pleasant, easily-pleased lodger. Hugh did not take in the notion of her departure, he was far too much absorbed by a splendid box of bricks which she had bestowed upon him.

A couple of weeks later the doctor, with much toil and trouble, managed to steal four days from his patients, this was all the time he could spare, for the simplest and quietest of weddings at the modest parsonage in ———shire, where he and his adored *fiancée* were made one.

An hour or two before he started on his happy errand (he traveled by night), Doctor Macnab was a little annoyed by hearing that Mrs. Wingrove wished to speak to him.

"Ask her to come in!" he said.

He was sitting at dinner, his wraps and a Gladstone bag lying in a big arm-chair.

"Come along Mrs. Wingrove, never mind my being at dinner, I want to catch the 8.20 train from Paddington."

"Dear, dear Doctor! I never knew you to take a holiday before!"

"No, I don't suppose you did, but I never before had so good an excuse for one."

"Indeed, sir! and what may that be?"

"I am to be married to-morrow."

"Bless my heart! and who to, if I may ask, to a young lady in the country?"

"Right you are, Mrs. Wingrove! Have a glass of wine, and drink my health."

"Thank you, Doctor, I'm sure I wish you and your good lady every happiness!"

"Much obliged, as soon as I come back, I'll bring my wife to see you! now what is it, Mrs. Wingrove?"

"It's this, sir," she took a small thick parcel from the front of her bodice, "and a very extraordinary thing it is! I had gone over to the High Street to settle about an overcharge in my book with my grocer, and when I came back and was opening the gate, which is rather stiff, a gentleman, rather a stout gentleman in a big brown overcoat, and a queer foreign-looking hat, came up behind me. He stared a bit, so did I. He had thick, bushy, white eyebrows, and long white mustaches, I hardly know why I noticed him so much.

Well, as soon as I got in, I sat down to tea in my little back parlor. I had scarcely finished my first cup

when there came a peel of the bell that might have waked the dead. I jumped up and ran out myself, flinging the door wide open, and gazing round, but not a creature could I see, nor a mark of footsteps. To be sure it was fine and dry, so I stepped back feeling angry at being disturbed, when I noticed this parcel in the letter box."

"Well, and what is it?" asked Macnab impatiently.

"It contained three rolls of sovereigns each with £50 written on it and this bit of a letter, please, sir, read it."

Some dozen lines were carefully printed by hand on the paper she gave him, in the same way as the other communications touching the boy had been written, and ran thus—

"Three rouleaux, each fifty sovereigns, enclosed for the use of the boy Hugh Brown. Make the most of it, for it will be a long time before a further remittance can be sent." That was all.

"This is a very curious development of our drama, Mrs. Wingrove! What do you think?"

"I'm sure I can't think nothing, sir! only I seem to feel it was that foreign-looking old gent as put the parcel into the letter-box; I do not know why I should feel so, but I do! Anyhow, I lost no time in coming to you, Doctor, for I should not get a wink of sleep if I kept that money in the house."

"And what am I to do with it? It's too late to lodge it in the bank! I'll tell you what's best, I'll lock it away in my safe, and give you an acknowledgment for the amount."

"Oh! I'm sure that's not necessary."

"I thought you were too shrewd a woman of business to say that, Mrs. Wingrove. If I were smashed up on my journey to-night how could you ever prove that poor child's right to the money. Just let me finish my bit of macaroni and I'll count the cash, write the receipt, and lodge the sovs. in my safe. Take another glass of wine, Mrs. Wingrove. I fancy you'll like the future Mrs. Macnab when you see her; she is far and away too good for me."

"Anyway, I'll not think that, sir, nor will anyone of your patients think so!"

"Gad! what a first-rate opinion you must have of me! By-the-way, have you let Miss Selby's rooms yet?"

"Not yet; I have her boxes there. I promised to keep them a bit, till she wrote and told me where they were to be sent."

The doctor was silent for a moment; he was counting the sovereigns, which he did under Mrs. Wingrove's eye.

"One hundred and fifty, sure enough. Cautious, eh! never sends notes which may be traced. Now there's my acknowledgment, and there stands my iron safe—I'll lock up the cash before your eyes. As soon as I come back we'll consult what's best to be done with the money."

"I'll let it accumulate for the next five or six years, anyway, sir. The thing is to find a good safe investment."

"Just so, just so! Now I must turn you out, Mrs. Wingrove, and if Miss Selby's boxes are in your way just send them on here, for I hope that by this time to-morrow she will be Mrs. Macnab!"

"Bless us and save us, sir. Are you going to marry Miss Selby?"

"Yes, that I am. There's luck for you!"

"Well, I am sure, Doctor, I am pleased for both of you. A nicer lady never stepped, and as for yourself, you know what I think, and I am glad your good lady (if I may call her so already) has taken to my dear little boy. She'll help me with him by-and-by. Do you know, sir, all I pray is that his cruel, unnatural mother may never come back to claim him. It would break my heart."

"Very likely; but remember, you never heard that story Mrs. Brown promised to tell you, and God knows what difficulties may constrain her."

"Well, begging your pardon, Doctor, you men (I mean gentlemen) are contradictory. When I am sorry for that—that woman, you seem to think me a weak fool, and if I am justly angry with her, you take her part."

"No doubt I am a donkey in many ways; certainly at this present moment my judgment isn't worth much."

"For all that, you'd see what was the matter with anyone in the twinkling of an eye. I see you are in a fidget, sir, so I'll say good-evening, and may every blessing rest on your marriage, Doctor. You'll give my duty to Miss Selby, and tell her I'll make a cake for my precious lamb in honor of to-morrow."

In the succeeding years Dr. Macnab often thought that the good landlady's blessings had indeed brought him luck. A happier or more prosperous man in his degree did not exist in the wide range of Maida Vale

and St. John's Wood. His wife, too, in looking back at her own mental condition when she accepted him, felt amazed at the comparatively worldly motives which actuated her, so sincere, so warm, was the affection which their every-day life together had developed. His strong, honest nature and shrewd intelligence made him an interesting companion, and constant association with herself exercised a refining, elevating influence, for which she did not dream of taking any credit.

In due time household treasures were added to their store of good things, in the shape of a dark-haired, dark-eyed boy and a tiny girl with ruddy locks and a pert, upturned nose.

Lady Hazelhurst was immensely surprised, not to say disgusted, to find that Miss Selby,

"Whom I always considered quite a well-bred person, my dear," she said to her cousin, the Honorable Adeline Meredith, "preferred marrying an insignificant little man, an ordinary general practitioner in a second-rate suburb, to the chance of occasionally staying or traveling with me! She will sink into a mere nobody."

"She never was anything else," returned the Honorable Adeline, "at any rate, while she was with Aunt Caroline."

"I am sure, Addy, mamma was wonderfully good to her, and she ought to have been glad to help me a little for her sake. But Lottie Selby was always rather self-seeking. However, I bear no malice which is a contemptible feeling unworthy of a well-bred gentlewoman, so I gave her a wedding present, a dozen such pretty silver (electro silver, you know) afternoon tea-

spoons, in such a neat little case ! She was quite pleased. When she has her Maida Vale acquaintances to tea she can say they were a present from her friend Lady Hazelhurst."

"And mention they are *AI* electro-plate, perhaps !"

"How funny you are, Addy ! I don't suppose she will ever think of that ! You don't suppose she knows about hall-marks and things of that kind ?"

"Probably not !" returned Miss Meredith, an impecunious aristocratic spinster of a certain age, whose interest it was to be on good terms with the Viscountess.

"No," went on that lady, "I never bear malice, and as Lottie was always very nice and obliging to me in old times, I shall call to see her when I pass through town. She is lively and amusing, and it is wonderful how pretty she has made her house, quite a mean little place, but it doesn't look a bit common."

Lady Hazelhurst always felt a sort of irritating interest in Mrs. Macnab, but resolved in her own mind that she would never consent to be godmother to any Macnab baby ; yet she was surprised and not a little mortified, that her mother's ex-companion never besought her to accept that sinecure, and seemed absolutely indifferent to the luster which such a sponsor might have thrown upon either of her babies.

At this stage we must renounce detail and take a bird's-eye view of the years immediately succeeding.

CHAPTER V.

FOR the next nine or ten years the quiet routine of Hugh Brown's life was unbroken by any sign from his mother, and on the whole his "Grannie," as he continued to call her, had reason to be satisfied with her adopted boy.

His progress at school, however, was intermittent. At times he worked splendidly, and then fits of idleness would seize the boy, from which no remonstrances could arouse him.

His childish beauty had disappeared, leaving him a big, bony, rather stern-looking lad, a little stubborn in temper, but not unkindly or rough. Animals were fond of him, and he never was guilty of the slightest cruelty towards them. The only bone of contention between him and his "Grannie" was his proneness to waste his time in a stable-yard which was unfortunately in their near neighborhood. Here he became a favorite with the stable men, and even with those dignified functionaries, the private coachmen, who frequented it, and who were glad enough to accept his unpaid help, while the handiness and pluck he showed in cleaning and often mounting fractious horses earned their admiration.

Not so his "Grannie." She was terrified at the risks he ran, angry at the waste of time, and quite convinced

he would learn to gamble, drink, swear, besides fighting (for which he had a natural tendency), and every other vice, from his horsey friends. Mrs. Wingrove had an unavowed conviction that the boy was the child of very aristocratic, if not princely, parents, and expected him to show a horror of everything coarse and unrefined. Whereas Hugh had a true boy's indiscriminating love of any acts or words indicative of daring danger, adventure, or defiance, whether in good or bad cause. The worst of it was she could not persuade him to see the wickedness of his conduct, or extract a promise that "he would never do it again."

Her help and consolation at this time was the doctor and the doctor's wife. At their house Hugh was always welcome, and his predilection for the grooms at Oakeley Mews never rivaled the attractions of the doctor's quiet, refined home.

Meantime Mrs. Wingrove steadily prospered. She became widely known to a great number of temporary dwellers in the Metropolis, and her rooms were never empty.

Latterly she had a steady tenant in the ground-floor apartment who had a happy influence on Hugh.

The Rev. Gerald Dalton was curate to a very high Church Rector of St. Gregory's, a frightful red-brick edifice in the neighborhood, the exterior of which was past redemption, though the incumbent, a man of good fortune, would willingly have spent his last cent to give it a medieval aspect.

Within, things were less unmanageable—at least he could put in stained-glass windows, and create a dim religious light; he could abolish pews, and make the

recess containing an old-fashioned "Communion-table" into a tolerable chancel and altar; while on the choir he lavished care and thought and cost.

He had a willing helper in his curate, who had a good tenor voice and a sound knowledge of music.

When he had been about a month Mrs. Wingrove's tenant, his attention was attracted to Hugh, who was weeding his "Grannie's" front garden and raking the walks, one fine summer's evening, while he sang snatches of a negro melody at intervals. The curate was at dinner with the window open, and when Jane removed the remains of his frugal repast he questioned her regarding the boy, and asked to see him. Then he made him sing, and Hugh, who was troubled with no shyness, readily complied, though greatly amused at the idea of any gentleman caring to hear him.

"You have a sweet pipe, my boy," said the curate, a slight, delicate-looking man, with a kind, irresolute face, and pale, hay-colored hair; "would you like to sing in church?"

"Oh! yes, sir!" brightening up, "that is if I could. I often go to St. Gregory's, specially of a Sunday evening, and when they sing, 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,' it seems a bit like what it might be in heaven!"

"Ah! that shows a religious tendency. Then, should you like to join the choir? If so," and the reverend gentleman proceeded to give a short homily on the duties of a choir-boy, to which Hugh listened eagerly, seeking a break in which to say, "Would you please speak to Grannie, sir; I think she'd be ever so glad."

And "Grannie" was extremely pleased. Here was a

most desirable counter-attraction to the stable-yard with its dangerous quadrupeds, and its objectionable bipeds.

Hugh threw himself eagerly into the vocation of a chorister, and before long attained the distinction of singing the solos in anthems. He had a delicious voice, sweet and true, more, a most correct ear, and a natural aptitude for music. The heart of Mrs. Wingrove was uplifted by the notice taken of her boy, by both Curate and Rector. She began to think of some genteel clerkship for his future career, instead of apprenticing him to a trade, as had been her original intention. But alas! not even "the concord of sweet sounds" could quite wean him from the joys of an occasional mount, or the proud satisfaction of being entrusted with a fidgety horse to rub down. "The young feller has 'the hands,'" observed an elderly and largely-experienced coachman, as he chewed a straw and watched Hugh critically guiding a highly nervous, spirited horse out of the yard. "He'd do well as a jockey. His people ought to let him train."

"He'd grow too big for that," returned an equally experienced groom. "You'll see he'll stretch to five feet ten or six feet before he's of age! then there would be an end of him as a jockey."

"Well, that's true," replied the coachman, and the conversation ended.

About the time that Hugh was established as one of the chief attractions at St. Gregory's, which was becoming well known for its fine choir and well-conducted services, the boy's life was happy and full of interest, but he confessed he did not look forward to spending his maturer years at desk work.

"Could I go to sea, Grannie?" he asked one evening as he sat at supper with Mrs. Wingrove, "or go into some big stables? I'm sure I could ride races before long; and oh! wouldn't it be grand to come in first, with the crowds hurraing and the ring shouting, and every one wanting to shake hands with the winner's jockey."

"Bless the boy! How you run on! Why, what do you know about races? You never saw one, anyway I hope not."

"No, I haven't! I wish I had; I would have gone if I had a chance, Gran', but not on the sly. Dick Caffin, Sir John Playford's head groom, told me. He is an Irishman, and he can talk."

"Don't let me hear you jabbering nonsense like that! Why haven't you the ambition to be a gentleman, my dear, I'm sure you look one?"

"Oh, I've ambition enough, only I don't see how I'm to make a gentleman of myself."

"That depends on what sort of a start you make. Suppose the doctor got you into a bank, I'm sure he could; or, better still, a clergyman, if I could only manage the education. I'm sure that with your voice and the character for religion Mr. Dalton gives you, you seem cut out for the Church."

"I'd rather be a groom than a clergyman," said Hugh, with an air of profound reflection. "Clergymen have no fun. It's all very fine to sing and hear singing. I am ever so fond of both, but they are just nothing compared to a good gallop. No, I can't tell you what that's like."

Mrs. Wingrove did not answer; she was asking her-

self if this was not a suitable opportunity to tell the boy his own history. She had intended to do so for some time. She knew he ought not to be left in ignorance of his relation to herself, and her guide and counselor, Dr. Macnab, had strongly advised her to let him know the truth. She dreaded the revelation, but, taking her courage in both hands, she now suddenly determined to speak.

First, she very carefully and silently packed up the supper things on a tray and called Jane to remove them, while Hugh took up a newspaper. Then Mrs. Wingrove drew a sock on her left hand and began to darn diligently.

"You see, my dear child (for so you always seem to me), one reason I am anxious to start you well in life is that you have no one in the world to look to but yourself, neither kith nor kin, no brothers or sisters. You belong to no one but me."

"Well, grannie, I must have had a father and mother, and lately I have wondered a little about them, but as I knew your relations all lived in the country I did not trouble much. I should like to know who my father was. I suppose my mother was your daughter?" said Hugh, raising his deep blue eyes to hers.

"No, my poor dear, that she was not!"

Mrs. Wingrove on this opening began to relate the curious story of his birth, to which the boy listened with breathless interest, his young face growing set and stern as she proceeded.

He did not interrupt her by a single question or remark, and until she had finished she had no idea what

impression the narrative made upon him. When she stopped speaking he leant his elbows on the table by which he was sitting, and covered his face with his hands. Mrs. Wingrove thought she heard something like a sob, but the next minute he looked up, his face flushed and an angry light in his eyes.

"And she deserted me, my own mother! Left me to the charity and pity of a stranger! Why you might have sent me to the workhouse, I might have started as a pauper—you—you have been good to me, grannie, and I will be good to you. I'll be what you like, and—oh! why did my own mother forsake me? Why was she so cruel?"

"God knows, my lamb! She was in sore trouble, that I could see, but she was a sweet, beautiful lady. Who knows what villain, or villains she had to do with, and you see she did try to provide for you. Your little bit of money has not dwindled in my hands or the doctor's; he will always be your friend. Cheer up, my dear. God has been good to you. He has given you health, strength, good looks, and clear brains! You'll make a place for yourself in the world yet, my precious boy."

"Ay! but He took my mother from me by a worse way than death! I could have dreamed of her and loved her in the grave! But now I'll love you, grannie, and I'll make my own way! I believe I can. Oh! it is hard to belong to no one, and it makes me feel hard."

"Have patience, my dear, have patience. You will learn the reason of everything yet! Now I am going to give you something to keep as a sort of clue, to find out maybe, who you are."

"Who I am? Do you think I shall ever seek to know? Not I. I should never acknowledge my mother if I did find her out. No, I am your boy, grannie. I never want to be anyone's else."

"You must be patient, dear! I always hope that one day your poor mother will explain matters. I have been angry with her too, but when I think of her fair face, her beautiful sad eyes, I cannot believe her heartless!"

She left the room as she spoke. Hugh remained standing, gazing at vacancy through the window.

Mrs. Wingrove was not many minutes absent; when she returned she had a very small box in her hand, from this she took some cotton wool and showed Hugh a ring of the elongated diamond shape called "Marquise." It was composed of one large brilliant, and a surrounding cluster of small ones. "Look at these foreign words inside; the doctor said they were Italian. If I give you this, my dear, will you keep it safe and sound?"

Hugh took and examined the ring carefully.

"It is a fine thing," he exclaimed, handing it back to Mrs. Wingrove, "but I would rather not have it in my keeping! I should lose it, and it would bring me no luck. No, grannie, you keep it! and sell it if you want any money; I give it to you."

"Very well, I will take charge of it for a bit longer, but you must take it later on."

"Anyhow, I don't want to have it now! It's a fine, clear night, I'll go and have a quick walk to clear my brain."

He snatched up his cap and disappeared before she could reply.

As Mrs. Wingrove said afterwards to the doctor when repeating the conversation, "The poor boy took it very hard and somehow he has never been the same. He never was much of a talker, but he has been awful silent ever since I told him about his mother, and there's a set look in his face that troubles me."

"I should not trouble myself, Mrs. Wingrove; the buoyancy of youth will soon float him over this mortification. He is not a commonplace character, by any means. I don't really know much of him; I am too busy to study anyone, but my wife has a high opinion of him. He ought to be earning something soon, Mrs. Wingrove. I wish you could educate him for my profession, there's nothing like it, at any rate for interest, and it's not unprofitable either; a thoughtful young fellow like Hugh would make a first-rate sawbones."

"I'm afraid I could not manage that, sir; it would take a deal to keep him, too, till he got a practise, though I have not done so bad; but it takes a deal of working and scraping to get a little bit of money together."

Thereupon Mrs. Wingrove started upon a discussion of her financial position, and rather surprised the doctor by the details of her success, and how she meant to dispose of her savings.

Doctor Macnab was a fairly true prophet—Hugh recovered from the shock he had received sooner than his grannie anticipated, but he seemed older and more in earnest about whatever he did.

The master of the "Commercial School," where, by the advise of her clerical lodger, Mrs. Wingrove placed

the boy, reported him as steady, studious, and decidedly clever at mathematics and arithmetic.

To his grannie he was observant and obedient, though he still indulged in an occasional ride with his friends the grooms in Oakeley Mews, especially after his voice broke, and he had not the pleasure of singing in the choir.

But the long spell of an untroubled and sheltered existence was soon destined to end.

When Hugh was approaching his seventeenth year Doctor Macnab obtained a clerkship for him in a large ironmonger's establishment, much to Mrs. Wingrove's satisfaction.

"You'll get a knowledge of the trade, my dear boy, and then with the bit of money you have and what I can give you, you may get a partnership, and rise to be the head of a big concern," she said.

Hugh made no reply, but at once declared his readiness to work.

"So you begin office-work to-morrow, Hugh," said Mrs. Macnab, one fine June Sabbath evening, when he called as he sometimes did, to enjoy a tête-à-tête with his kind friend, while the doctor took the children for a walk.

"Yes, Mrs. Macnab! I suppose I shall make a lot of mistakes to begin with."

"I don't think you are as much pleased about your new engagement as Mrs. Wingrove, eh, Hugh?"

A slow smile spread over Hugh's face, and he looked into her eyes with a questioning glance.

"Well, no! you always let me speak out to you; you will not say what I have said! You don't know how

grateful I am to you for all your kindness, and for this above all—that I may open my mind to you, and, indeed, you seem to me different from any one else, you understand every one!" enthusiastically.

"Thank you, Hugh. Well, then, tell me what you think of your new appointment."

"I hate it!" said Hugh in a low, deep tone, "I hate sitting at a desk, and having been rather idle lately, I hate it more than ever!"

"But what else would you like? It is more genteel than learning a trade."

"I should much prefer being a carpenter. I'd like sawing, joining, manual labor, and earning my bread by the sweat of my brow, instead of scratching entries in a book and sitting cramped up on a stool all day. I'd rather be a groom, to tell you the truth! One might rise to be a stud groom in a big establishment. That's not a bad place! As to being a gentleman, I never care about what's out of reach. Not that I shouldn't like to be one, a real gentleman, born and bred! I used to dream of how nice it would be, and to go into Parliament and a lot of things. But never since grannie told me! I am worse off than the son of an honest laborer! There's the shadow of disgrace on my birth. I cannot say who my parents were, I can never mention them."

"Never mind, Hugh," said Mrs. Macnab, moved by the passion and bitterness which he poured out in this long speech. "You will be liked for yourself, and I am sure you will get on! But if you preferred to be an artisan, why did not you tell Mrs. Wingrove? I am sure she would not have objected!"

"I think she would. She has a notion that you are nearer being a gentleman if you don't soil your hands with tools, forgetting that ink-stains are more indelible. But, Mrs. Macnab, I owe her too much to contradict her. She wished me to take this offer, and I have taken it. Besides, I start at a salary of twelve shillings a week, that will keep me in clothes and something over. It will be a little relief to gran. In six months I'll get a rise, if I deserve it. I'll try! I'd rather be grooming a horse, but if I go in for this business I'll do my best to get to the top of it and make a lot of money."

"I am glad to hear you say so, Hugh. I am sure you will succeed. Only don't let yourself grow hard because you are forced to work at what you do not like. Get all the pleasure you can out of life. That is true wisdom."

"I have not felt real pleasure for some time, but that will come by and by, if I feel a breath of success. It is very good of you to listen to me, Mrs. Macnab."

Here the conversation was interrupted and soon Hugh went away.

He did not get a rise by any means as soon as he expected, nor did he master his work as rapidly as Mrs. Wingrove anticipated; but he toiled on perseveringly, and gradually recovered his spirits and hopefulness.

These latter days were very delightful to Mrs. Wingrove and Jane, who little expected—but what they did not expect belongs to the next chapter.

CHAPTER VI.

THE spring succeeding Hugh Brown's introduction to business and actual life was exceedingly cold and changeable in temperature. A good deal of minor illness made Doctor Macnab extremely busy, and cut off old and delicate people. Hugh kept steadily at work, and made friends with one or two of the employees at the firm where he worked, not exactly the friends Mrs. Wingrove would have chosen for her precious boy; indeed his favorite was a bright, unsteady Irish lad, who was never out of scrapes, with whom Hugh seemed happier and more cheerful than with anyone else.

Mrs. Wingrove struggled feebly against this black sheep. "Don't bring that lad Murphy here to dinner on Sundays, Hugh," she said. "He's always on the grin! There's not a music-hall slangy song he hasn't at his fingers' end, to say nothing of his being a black Papist!"

"Black, grannie? There's nothing black about Dick Murphy. He may not be steady, but he's the best-hearted fellow I ever met, and clever, too. Of course he always sees the funny side of things first. Then he is all alone in London, and if you won't give him a Sunday dinner now and again, I doubt if he will ever get one. It always does me good to be with

Murphy." Needless to say that Hugh prevailed. Though Hugh often accompanied him to music-halls, and what was quite as bad in Mrs. Wingrove's estimation, to mass, when any specially fine music was to be heard. Still, all this wild dissipation did not seem to affect Hugh much. He never asked his grannie for money, nor did he fail to rise early and attend punctually to his work.

During this cold and cutting spring, however, Mrs. Wingrove, deceived by a bright sun, went out one morning insufficiently wrapped up, and meeting a bitter east wind caught a severe cold. This quickly developed into bronchitis, and almost before Jane thought there was serious danger, the kindly, capable woman succumbed.

Then indeed Hugh felt he was alone.

Doctor Macnab was greatly touched by the boy's profound grief. Hugh was usually undemonstrative, and having the strange unfeeling conduct of the mother before his eyes, the doctor sometimes feared the boy might prove cold or heartless. On this occasion, however, none could doubt the depth and sincerity of his grief.

"It is indeed a cruel loss to you, my boy, to be left alone while still greatly needing a home. I suppose you guess that your excellent friend has left you all she possessed, in addition to the trifle confided to her care by, I suppose, your mother. I am sorry she made no bequest to Jane, who has been a faithful creature." So spoke the doctor to the chief mourner, whom he had kindly brought home to dinner the day of the funeral.

"She did not forget Jane, however; the last distinct words she spoke to me were 'Mind you take care of my poor Jane!' and I will if I can, sir, with your help."

"You certainly cannot without it, Hugh! I am trustee to the settlement Mrs. Wingrove made upon you some years ago, to avoid the cost of probate and succession duty, etc. This, of course, it was not necessary to tell you until you reached years of discretion. I am also your guardian."

"Thank you, Doctor, for undertaking that responsibility. I hope never to give you any trouble."

"I begin to hope you will not, but don't make too sure of yourself; life is a tremendous test. We must reflect what's the best to be done with the house and the lodgers and all that; it's a good business."

"Well, Doctor, no doubt you are the best judge, but it seems to me that the best thing to do is to keep it on just as it is as long as Jane can work it; and she can, as well as grannie. She did almost everything latterly; she'll have her food and wages as usual, and suppose we put away a percentage of the profits—a good percentage—to accumulate for her? I'll want very little out of the concern. I am to have a rise of salary next month, and I hope to spend as little as possible."

"It's not a bad idea; I'll reflect upon it. Then you would go on living in the same way?"

"That's what I think of, sir; and, so far as I can, pay for my food, to help save the profits."

"Stick to that, Hugh! I am glad to see you are more reconciled to your work, eh?"

"No, Doctor Macnab, I am not! I do not intend to remain with Messrs. Evans and Bright, but I promise not to change except for the better."

"Aha! you mean for what you like better, which is another matter altogether."

"I am not so sure of that! one always does best at what one likes best."

"A convenient doctrine! Well, Hugh, do nothing rash!"

"No, sir, that I will not."

"Come along, have a talk with Mrs. Macnab. She'll comfort you if anyone will. When do you go back to work?"

"To-morrow."

"So much the better. No restorative like occupation. I'll be tremendously busy to-morrow and next day. On Thursday come up here in the evening, and I'll explain matters and let you know how everything stands. All the late Mrs. Wingrove's papers are in the hands of Mr. Gibbs, who is my solicitor also, a capital man. How old are you Hugh? I have ushered so many young people into the world that I forget their dates."

"I'll be eighteen next August."

"Hum, you are tall for your years, and no weedy, run-to-seed stripling, good broad chest; but come along up-stairs. The children have gone to bed by this time, and Mrs. Macnab will be alone."

Matters were arranged very much in accordance with Hugh's ideas, yet the change from the old life was very great. The feeling of home had vanished with the departure of grannie from the scene. Hugh cared

less and less to return to the solitude of his abode of an evening. He grew familiar with the shilling galleries of the higher-class theaters, and more frequently brought Dick Murphy back with him to high tea, to Jane's disapprobation, though she had no real reason to find fault with either of the young men.

But she had a fixed conviction that the Irish lad just lived upon her precious young master, as she considered Hugh, and in fact this pleasant acquaintance was perhaps the most expensive item in the young fellow's daily life.

The doctor, as winter brightened into spring and spring warmed into summer, occasionally asked his wife, whose kind hospitality to the desolate boy was always ready, "Does that boy ever talk to you of leaving his present place?"

"No," she would return. "He never says anything about it, but I do not think he still stay there."

"Why do you think so?"

"The reason why, I cannot tell, but an instinct tells me so."

"Oh, I'll never dispute a woman's instinct, but it is a pity he should leave. I met Evans the other day, who gave a very good report of him; says he has a capital head for figures. He is a steady fellow, too, I believe."

"So do I; but he is a kind of young man who will go his own way, very politely, but very firmly. I must say I am deeply interested in Hugh Brown. I would give anything to know who his father was—to know his mother's history."

The doctor was far too busy to speculate on the

mystery of his ward's birth and parentage. He made inquiries about him from time to time, and felt quite satisfied that his wife's ideas on the subject were all bosh.

He was a good deal disturbed at one occasion by a demand from Hugh for four pounds of his own money ; at first he hesitated a good deal to say why he required the cash, but at last Dr. Macnab extracted an admission that he wanted to lend it to a friend who had got into a scrape, but the doctor stood firm.

Hugh must not be soft and easily imposed upon. He must not associate with chaps who got into scrapes and wanted four pounds to extricate themselves from the results of their own folly and extravagance.

Then Hugh suddenly ceased to plead, and observed, "I am sorry, sir, you cannot see your way to grant my request, but I will not trouble you any more," and at once dropped the subject.

His sudden submission struck the doctor with an odd sense of defeat, and the conviction, "He'll get that four pounds by hook or by crook," flashed upon him.

After the approved fashion of Metropolitan middle-class life, Mrs. Macnab took her children regularly to the seaside for the summer holidays, and the doctor came as often as he could from Saturday to Monday. Devonshire was generally their happy hunting ground, but this year they sought the bracing breezes of Eastbourne, where they stayed later than usual.

It was the second week of October when Mrs. Macnab and her children were again settled in their home for the winter ; the doctor had managed four or five

days' holiday on end, and felt like a giant refreshed and ready for the busy months which lay before him.

He was sitting over the fire with his wife one evening in the dining-room, when the servant announced that "Mr. Brown" wished to know if it were too late to speak to him.

"Oh, no, show him in; it must be a couple of months since I heard or saw anything of him," this to Mrs. Macnab.

"No! I have wondered what has become of him." Here Hugh walked in. His good friend, the doctor's wife, noticed that he looked rather white and very grave.

"I fear I am intruding at an unsuitable hour, but I am very anxious to speak with you," he said, after shaking hands and inquiring for the children.

"All right, my boy, come into the consulting-room."

"Pray do not disturb yourself, sir, if she does not mind, I can say my say before Mrs. Macnab."

"I shall be quite interested, Hugh," she returned.

"Sit down then and fire away, I am so lazy I am glad to stay where I am."

"I have made up my mind to leave Evans & Co.," began Hugh deliberately.

"Oh, indeed! I hope you have something else in view."

"Yes, I have. The truth is I gave them warning a fortnight ago, but stayed on till they filled my place. I did not tell you because you were away for a holiday, and I would not trouble you; well, that is not the exact truth, I knew you would disapprove of what I was going to do."

"Then, Hugh, why did you do it?" cried Mrs. Macnab.

"Because I felt, and thought, after a lot of thinking, that it was the best line I could take for my purpose, only I do hope the doctor will not think me ungrateful. I feel deeply all his and your goodness to me, madam, and the hope of deserving your good opinion will always be present with me."

"Why, what the deuce have you done?" exclaimed the doctor, sitting straight up in his easy chair.

"I have enlisted in the —th Light Dragoons, a regiment under orders for India, to sail in December."

"Why, good God, you are an idiot! What, leave your present respectable position to associate with the thieves and vagabonds that fill the ranks of our regiments. You'll be begging me to buy you out before you are a month in. It's the devil's own trade, soldiering; all very well for a young man with a commission and independent means, but to be in the ranks! It is sheer madness. Do you mean to say that you have actually enlisted without a word to your guardian?"

"And my benefactor," added Hugh. "Yes, I have, sir."

"How could you? Oh, you will be so miserable among all those horrid men!" said Mrs. Macnab.

"Pray have the patience to hear my reasons. I don't think you can know how hateful it is to me, the inactivity of desk-work. I long to be out in the open air, always on foot or on horseback, always in exercise. I have never talked about my likings or dislikings, but I prefer a soldier's life to any. I know the first steps

are hard and unpleasant, but I have made up my mind to endure that, and I don't believe there is any profession in which it is so easy to rise, up to a certain point. Obedience is no hardship to me. I see the necessity for it. The greater number of men in the army are ignorant, and given to drink. Officers must favor a steady, sober, fairly educated young fellow. I am all that, thanks to the kind care which has been bestowed upon me." His voice broke and he paused to recover it.

"But, you simpleton, you'll be a gray-haired veteran before you can win a lieutenant's commission, even under the most favorable circumstances. You will never be able to marry any woman at all suited to you, you'll be poor and——"

"Marriage is not a necessity, sir!"

"Faith, almost," quoth the doctor.

"And though I may not win a commission there are many very fair appointments for which non-commissioned officers are eligible. In India little wars are always breaking out, and I may get a chance of the honors of war."

"You are a minor, and I'll buy you out and forbid you to——"

"Forgive me, Doctor," said Hugh, with a grave smile, "I shall only enlist again."

"Listen to me, you foolish boy. If you'll stay, I'll help you to study medicine and take you as an assistant as soon as you've passed your examinations."

"You are far too good, sir. I do not deserve it at your hands," cried Hugh, with emotion, "but I am not the stuff of which doctors are made. Let me 'gang

my ain gait.' I am certain I have chosen the line to which I am best suited. I may be young, but I am not thoughtless, I have some self-control. I know I have only myself to depend upon, and I am determined to do the best for myself."

"You had better let him go his own way," observed the doctor's wife. "He seems full of purpose, and he may be right."

"And what's to be done about funds? You don't suppose I'll let you make ducks and drakes of your bit of money, or send you cash to waste on your black-guard comrades?"

"Some will be blackguards and some will not. But I do not ask you for any money. I intend to live at the cost of my country, and let the little I have accumulate in your hands. It couldn't be in better, sir. If I find I want a pound or two very badly, I'll write and ask for it. If I do too often, refuse me."

"I am sure I don't know what to say!" said the doctor, fairly beaten.

"Forgive me, sir, but indeed you have no choice. A soldier I am determined to be, and I am ready to take the responsibility of the decision; but I would be sorry indeed if you quarreled with me on this account. You are the best and only friend I have. Bid me God-speed and let me go!"

"Oh, Hugh! How grieved I am you have taken such a step! Marjorie and Jack will miss their kind playmate."

"Ah, Mrs. Macnab! the hardest bit of the way is parting with you and the dear children. You, you have taught me ambition! to win my way to some-

thing of an equality with ladies like you I would dare a great deal. I may come and see you once more before I leave England. You won't mind my calling in a common soldier's uniform?"

"No, you will be an uncommon soldier, I am sure you will be, Hugh. Come and see us when you like."

"Come and have a bit of dinner to-morrow," the doctor was beginning, when Hugh interrupted him.

"You are awfully kind, sir, but I must report myself to-morrow at Canterbury, so I cannot have that great pleasure."

"Sharp work, Hugh! Well, remember if you are sick of soldiering before December, I will advance the money to buy you off, and you shall pay me when you come of age, with interest, my boy, heavy interest!"

"All right, sir. If I have made a mistake I deserve to pay for my obstinacy."

He stopped, rose up and offered his hand to the doctor, then turning to Mrs. Macnab,

"Am I presuming too much if I ask you to go and see poor Jane, Jane Dowty, now and again, and let the children go and see her? She'd be breaking her heart if she were not so angry."

"Hugh, have you a trifle of money?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where the deuce did you get it?"

"I had a trifle from my wages, and I sold most of my clothes."

"Have you your watch?"

Hugh took it from his pocket, and held it up.

"All right! Well, I am terribly cut up about this freak of yours."

"You may be sure I will look after Jane, and write to me, Hugh, if you are so disposed."

"Thank you, thank you ever so much, and will you, will you sometimes send me a line?"

"I will, indeed!"

The doctor and his wife talked long of their protégé after he had left them.

The former was greatly annoyed and disappointed, but Mrs. Macnab had an imaginative belief in Hugh's future.

"I think the boy is wise in following his instinct," she said. "It is evidently very strong."

"Folly is generally overwhelming," he growled. "You are converted to his ideas because he expresses them plausibly, and because, I suppose, you see him in your mind's eye looking deucedly handsome in his trooper's get-up."

Mrs. Macnab laughed heartily.

"I am not quite so silly as that, my dear old man, but I always fancy Hugh is sure to get on."

"Hum! I am not so sure. He is too reserved, too cold, to be attractive to strangers. I believe the biggest ingredient in his character is pride, and the effort to subdue it makes him seem unsympathetic. There, I must go to bed. Hang the boy for keeping me so long out of it, and I am dead tired."

It was early in the following December that Lady Hazelhurst paid her usual winter visit to Mrs. Macnab, as she passed through town. She took a curious degree of interest in her late mother's companion, chiefly arising from a sense of safety in making complaints of

her friends and acquaintances, many of whom were well known to the doctor's wife, and partly from curiosity, and a desire to find out if Mrs. Macnab was not tired of the suburban obscurity of a general practitioner's life, when she might have been the "souffre-douleurs" of the Viscountess Hazelhurst.

"You are really looking uncommonly well," said her ladyship in a querulous tone, as she took a cup of fragrant tea from her hostess. "I am sure you cannot say the same of me. I have been so unwell. A slight return of the malarial fever I had last year, and now I have a fresh trouble. You remember poor Dick Neville, Lord Hazelhurst's nephew? No, I am not sure you ever met him. Well, he succeeded my husband. He died some years ago, and left an only child, a daughter, so the title is extinct, which is rather provoking. This child has been brought up by some relation of her mother's (the mother is dead, too), a great invalid, who, it seems, is quite unfit to have the care of a girl, so the guardians have asked me to take charge of her, as she is now eleven. Of course it is a great responsibility, especially as my health is so precarious. I must find a very superior governess companion for her. What a pity it is, dear, that you are not free! You would have been the very thing. You have quite ladylike manners, and you were always in good society."

"Thank you, Lady Hazelhurst," said Mrs. Macnab, with a pleasant laugh, "but I prefer being a governess to my own children and companion to my husband."

"Oh! yes, that is quite right of course. Yes! you

are looking remarkably well. I suppose you get out of town sometimes?"

"Yes, we were away two months this autumn."

"Indeed, do you know I wish you would look out for some nice well-bred person to be with this child. The executors would give her a hundred a year, and that is really a large salary. She could save a good deal."

"I will make inquiries if you like, but you know I have a good deal to do."

"Don't you keep two servants?" asked the Viscountess, opening her eyes.

"Yes, even three, and a boy. Still——"

"Oh, it would not give you much trouble. There are a few advantages in this plan of Margaret Neville's guardians. I should be rent-free most of the year, as we are to reside chiefly at Caresford Court, and when we go abroad the larger part of the hotel bills will be hers. Then in six or seven years she must be presented, and she will be a great attraction. It is rather amusing to be the chaperon of a great heiress. She has all the estates though not the title; the property, too, will accumulate during her long minority. It is a sort of compensation to me for the short time I enjoyed the unexpected advantages of my marriage, poor Lord Hazelhurst only survived his brother two years."

"And you may get attached to this young creature, which will give an interest to your life."

"Perhaps so, but young girls are so very tiresome, and I rather think this child is a little eccentric; her mother was a Courtenay, and they are all more or less entêt  , given to art and music. Joscelin Courtenay became an artist—worked for money, I mean—indeed

they were all very poor—and he married an Italian peasant girl. However, he lived out of the way, abroad——”

Here the door was opened by a smart parlor-maid, who said, “Here’s Mr. Brown, ma’am,” and entered Hugh, in all the glory of a scarlet jacket with yellow braid and a yellow stripe down his trousers, which showed off his graceful length of limb. He held his forage-cap in his hand, and his sunburnt face looked bright and soft with genuine pleasure at the sight of his good friend Mrs. Macnab.

“Why, Hugh, this is most unexpected,” she exclaimed, rising to shake hands with him, and looking with surprise at his well set-up, soldierly figure ; he seemed taller and older.

“We have got the route sooner than we expected,” he exclaimed ; “and I have only one day in town—to-morrow I am to rejoin at Portsmouth, so I made a push to see the doctor and yourself.”

“Yes, of course ; the children are at tea, and will be so delighted to see you ; you will find them in the morning room. Just go down and give them a surprise.”

“So glad they are at home,” he returned, and with a slight bow towards Lady Hazelhurst, who was steadily examining him through her long-handled eyeglasses, he left the room.

“Why, who in the world is that, my dear ?” she exclaimed, when the young man had disappeared.

“A protégé of ours, and a ward of my husband’s.”

“But he is a common soldier ; there is no gold lace on his uniform. Why did you not get him a commission ?”

"We did not want him to go into the army, but he would enlist."

"But, surely, he is a gentleman. He looks quite distingué, quite. He has a look like the young Duke of Carnworth, only far better looking. Why didn't you get him a secretaryship?"

"Do you remember the time, long ago, when I broke my arm, you came to see me in my lodgings, and were interested in a pretty boy who was playing about my room?"

"Ye—es, I think I do."

"Well, that is the boy grown up."

"No, is it really? Dear me! There was a curious story about him, I think?"

"There is"—and Mrs. Macnab repeated it briefly.

"My dear Lottie, it is like one of Mrs. Parlbys novels. Well, then, he is most probably the son of a gentleman. What a pity you do not know the father; he might push him on—he is so good-looking and men are so vain. But I really must go, and you will see about a governess for me. She must be, etc., etc., etc."—a long string of essential qualities followed, and Mrs. Macnab was kept standing for nearly half an hour.

At last, however, she was free to join Hugh and the children.

They were a merry party, and Hugh was kept to dinner. He had an opportunity for a long talk with his admired confidant, to whom he confessed that the unpleasantness was greater, and the pleasantness less, than he had anticipated in his new profession. Nevertheless, he was as determined as ever to follow the



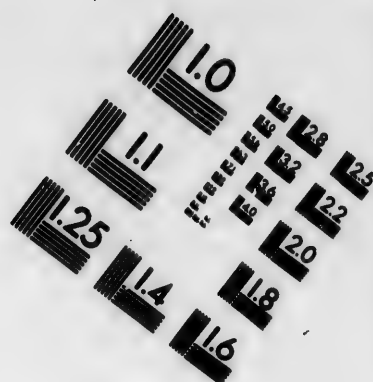
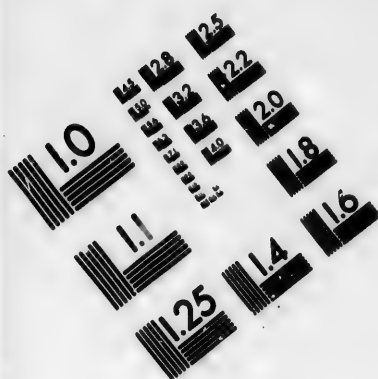
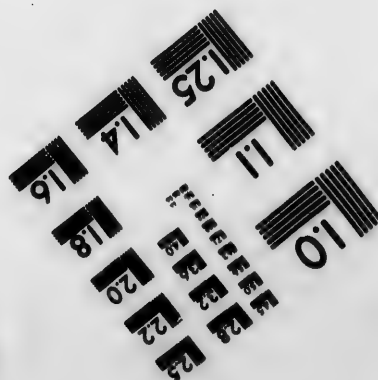
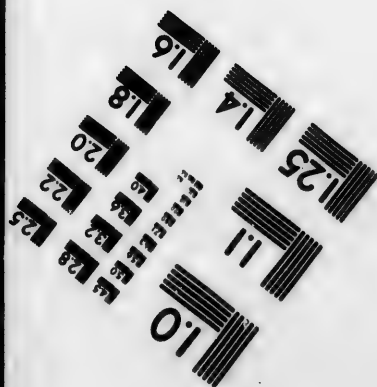
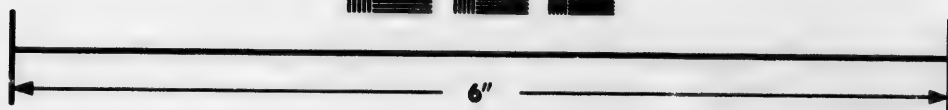
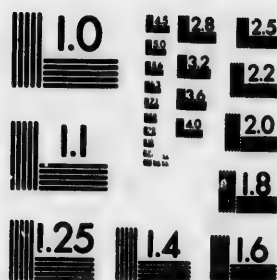


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drum, as convinced as ever that soldiering was his vocation, and that—"that way lay success."

He had a long talk over business matters with the doctor, who promised him a small allowance when he had reached his destination in India.

To Mrs. Macnab, after dinner, he made a singular request. "I spent all the morning with poor Jane," he said, "regulating and putting away a few matters and some few things that were valuable to me. I brought away this"—and he drew from under his jacket the diamond ring so often mentioned. "Once I thought I should never care to have it, but I have changed my mind. I shall keep it. I have a curious desire to track my—mother. Will you sew this up in something strong; a piece of a glove; anything, that I may hang it round my neck. Soldiers have neither pockets nor strong boxes."

"Yes, Hugh, with pleasure; give it to me." She took it out of the room, and after a while returned with it carefully sewn up in chamois leather, and suspended from a thin, old-fashioned gold chain. "There is your amulet, Hugh. Accept the little chain from me; it was mine when I was a light-hearted child. May it bring you luck."

Hugh thanked her warmly, and with unusual fluency. He went up-stairs to look at his little sleeping play-fellows, wrung the doctor's hand almost painfully, and kissed his wife's.

Then he went away to pass his last night in England under his poor grannie's roof, and bid Jane farewell. It was nearly ten years before he stood on English soil again.

PART II

CHAPTER VII.

CASTLETOWN is the capital of Blankfordshire, as every one knows, and a very important place ; not only in its own estimation, but as the center of a large agricultural district, and having within the last thirty or forty years developed manufacturing capabilities undreamed of before.

It is not a handsome town, nor does it boast either architectural beauty or interesting antiquities, having been for the first few hundred years of its existence a mere second or third rate market-town, poor and insignificant, until an enterprising native "returned" from foreign parts discovered that the water of a small river, which ran through it, was favorable to the production of certain dyes. He established a factory, and his example was soon followed. One kind of production demanded another, and the place quickly grew in size and ugliness.

The surrounding country was beautiful with the rich, placid beauty of English scenery, cultivated, carefully tended, comfortable, with smiling dales and pleasant hills, woods and waters, old country-seats, and new smiling villas. The grand place of the county, some

five or six miles from Castletown, was Caresford Court, a big, somber, red-brick building, with white stone copings, high dignified chimneys, and tall narrow windows.

A long, perfectly straight avenue led up to it, bordered on either side by a double row of great old lime trees, of more than a century's growth, the arched boughs of which formed a sylvan nave and side aisles of tender green leafage, where the bees in summer-time never ceased their labor song, and the delicate, delicious fragrance of the leaves made a fit atmosphere for Titania and her attendant fairies.

The road was narrow, and a wide border of velvety grass intervened between it and a low bank of mossy green on either side, from the top of which the rugged, gnarled stems of the lime trees sprang.

It was a lovely warm afternoon in mid-August, and the silence of a warm, breathless day had hushed every sound save the buzzing of the indefatigable bees, and even this had degenerated into a sleepy tone.

Midway in the avenue two girls sat on the shady side, the low bank forming a convenient resting-place.

They were most simply dressed in muslin frocks, one of pale, cool green, with a sash of the same color in soft silk, tied in a large drooping bow on the left side; the other in white muslin sprigged with small scarlet flowers and sash similiar to her companion's, but of scarlet, round the waist; both wore large hats of the lightest chip, trimmed with white muslin. Both had an air of daintiness and refinement. The girl in green was the taller; she was very fair with red-gold locks, a saucy, upturned nose, and a pair of changeful gray

eyes that were sometimes light and sometimes dark. The other was very slight, with a broad brow, and eyes that just missed being too far apart. They were brown hazel (there is an uncertain hazel that may sometimes be taken for blue-gray), very thoughtful eyes, shaded by dark lashes. Her rather wide mouth was well-shaped, the lips soft and full. She had a clear brunette complexion, the skin smooth and velvety, and the cheeks somewhat colorless habitually. The contour of the face narrowed from the broad low forehead to a most dainty delicate chin, and abundant nut-brown hair was coiled in a loose roll below her hat.

The fair girl was busy selecting the leaves of some wild plants which grew on the top of the bank, for until near the house the avenue was very much left to nature. The other leant back against a tree-root which had thrust itself forward; her small bare hands lying idly in her lap, the picture of repose.

But she soon broke the silence.

"How brown one's hands get when you do not wear gloves," she exclaimed complainingly in a low, rich voice.

"Why don't you wear them, then," returned the other, in a higher tone, and with a certain rapidity of utterance.

"Oh! I like being without them."

"I find them necessary. They are a defense when one gathers leaves and things."

"Yours are never idle, Val. Mine are often. But as yet Satan has not found much mischief to occupy them."

"He will some day. I sometimes wonder how you

will develop? I believe there are all sorts of possibilities in you, Margaret. Being what you are, so rich, so rarely contradicted, you may grow selfish."

"How can you say anything so horrid," cried Margaret, sitting up in the energy of her remonstrance. "There is nothing I hate and despise so much as selfishness."

"It is very unpleasant in others, but no one is consciously selfish. Don't fancy I see any selfishness in you at present, but you will be a wonder if you are not spoiled."

"You must be near me always, Val, to tell me unpleasant truths," and she laughed, showing a double row of pearly teeth.

"No, no! I should never have moral courage to make myself odious to you, and odious I should become. At present you are—well, a dear. Where, where is Ruskin? I laid him down beside my leaves. I think it is time we went in to tea; you know Lady Hazelhurst likes punctuality."

"She likes everything that is tiresome. You don't know what a polite battle I fought with her when I first left Madame de Vaux. She treated me as if I were a helpless idiot. I dare say she did not intend to be unkind, but she was such a nuisance! However, I soon made her understand that although I was quite willing to be nice and pleasant with her, I was not a baby. We have got on much better ever since. She is selfish—a funny, innocent kind of selfishness, the result of her absolute density. Well, come along, Val, she is old enough to be our mother, and we must not be ill-bred."

So saying, she rose, looked about for the missing book, found it, and they started to stroll leisurely along the left aisle of the leafy cathedral towards the grim-looking house.

The simply-dressed girl with the scarlet sash to whom her companion spoke so plainly, was the proprietress of the lovely avenue, the stately house, and many a broad acre round about with manorial and other rights too numerous to recapitulate.

She was an orphan, without near relatives, and brought up by a widow of her great-uncle, a woman of fashion, and supposed to be a most suitable chaperon for a noble demoiselle entitled by birth and wealth to mate with the most princely prince or ducal duke.

While the girls strolled homeward, Lady Hazelhurst sat in her special drawing-room looking on the grounds at the back of the house and enjoying the beams of the westering sun.

It was furnished in stately Louis Quatorze style, and the windows opened like doors to the *parterre* which ran along the back-front of the house, beyond which was a lawn stretching to a wooded mound, the trees extending at either side into a piece of well-kept copse.

Lady Hazelhurst was presiding over a tea-table furnished with "Queen Anne" silver and Worcester china, while a solemn footman attended to light the spirit lamp and hand the kettle which was placed with its heating apparatus on the tiled hearth.

"It is quite too warm to have the kettle near one," said Lady Hazelhurst to a guest who had been announced a few minutes before, a stout lady of middle height, richly and showily dressed, with a hook nose,

a pair of beady black eyes, and an unmistakable brown "front."

Lady Hazelhurst had long ago discarded her weeds, but affected black and gray, violet and slate color in her attire. She was a slight, colorless woman with hay-tinted hair, and pale gray eyes which were given to watering. Her thin-lipped mouth expressed perpetual dissatisfaction. She was most carefully dressed in lilac silk, with much black lace, and a dainty cap of fine point d'Alençon on her very small head. She wore ornaments of amethyst, with many rings on her thin fingers.

"Yes, it is very hot. I stopped for a few minutes at Baker's as I drove through Castletown this afternoon, and it was quite scorching on the sunny side of the street," returned the visitor, a neighboring county lady, the Honorable Mrs. Harrington Everard, of Dalington Hall, the next important person in the neighborhood to the Viscountess herself.

"That will do, John, put the bell near me," said her ladyship, and the man vanished.

"I wish Margaret were a little more punctual. She knows I like tea at half-past four, and," glancing at an elaborate china *pendule* on the mantelpiece, "it is now five. Pray take some cream scones, Mrs. Everard, they are very nice, but I am afraid to eat them, my digestion is very weak."

"That is unfortunate. Nothing ever affects mine," and Mrs. Everard with some difficulty removed her glove from a podgy right hand and helped herself.

"And how many do you expect on the 25th?" she asked.

"So far, I have had a hundred and ninety acceptances, and then we shall have rather a large house-party."

"You will be frightfully tired when it is all over."

"Of course I shall, and I am far from strong. But I never shrink from doing my duty, Mrs. Everard."

"I am sure you do not. Margaret ought to be very grateful to you."

"I think she knows how much she owes me," said Lady Hazelhurst with a deep sigh. "But young girls are generally tiresome, and I now regret I ever sent her to that Madame de Vaux in Paris. She certainly learned French thoroughly, and her playing is, if anything, too good. Her manner, too, is excellent, but her ideas are quite revolutionary, and she has made acquaintances that are by no means satisfactory."

"Indeed! How could that happen? I thought Madame de Vaux's establishment was so exclusive."

"Well, it is, in a sense. The Marchioness of Uppingham strongly recommended it; but you know, my dear Mrs. Everard that we, most of us, were very uncertain about calling on the Stapyltons when they took Eden Lodge last year. Of course Sir Robert is a very distinguished officer and all that, and of fairly good family, but she is really very doubtful; she was the famous singer Fraulein de Retz. She was quite the rage twenty or thirty years ago; she must be past fifty now I fancy. Sir Robert Stapylton came to Paris when she was immensely the fashion; I have heard poor dear Lord Hazelhurst talk of him; they were rather intimate. He was Colonel Stapylton then, and he fell desperately in love with her, wouldn't

listen to any advice, proposed, and was accepted. She never sang any more, in public, I mean, for she went out to India with him. Then came that expedition against those Hill tribes, when Sir Robert Stapylton made such a remarkable success. The papers were all full of it at the time. Then his health gave way, he had been badly wounded, I believe, so he retired, and settled himself here."

"A public singer and actress!" cried the Hon. Mrs. Everard, "that is really too much. We know what such gentry are."

"I believe she was a person of excellent character," resumed Lady Hazelhurst, with an air of magnanimity. "But she is horribly conceited, I assure you. She did not seem to be in the least grateful to me when I called upon her. Of course her training enabled her to assume the air of a 'grande dame,' but she really ought not to assume these tragedy-queen airs among people so much above her in station. However, you may imagine my horror when Margaret arrived to find her all delight and excitement because her favorite companion and confidante at Madame de Vaux's had come to live within two miles of us. Who do you think it is? Valerie Stapylton, Sir Robert's only daughter!"

"What! was she, too, at Madame de Vaux's?"

"She was, and I assure you the influence that girl has over Margaret is quite alarming." Lady Hazelhurst shook her head and fanned herself. "They are never happy apart, and Margaret has quite a determined way with her that seems to carry all before it. That Stapylton girl has been here since Monday, and

I protest has had more to do with the decorating and arrangements for the birthday ball than—than I have!"

"Really! you don't say so," said Mrs. Everard sympathetically.

"I do indeed! It is perfectly shameful. They have been out together ever since lunch-time. Sir Robert said that he and Lady Stapylton would call for his daughter this afternoon. Have you met him?" Mrs. Everard shook her head.

"He is quite the old soldier, a little rough, but not common. Men like him, and they are quite foolish about Lady Stapylton. Do you think her so handsome?"

"Well, yes, she has beautiful eyes, and I must say she knows how to use them. Tricks of the trade, my dear Lady Hazelhurst. These actresses are all alike. She certainly looks very distingué."

"Oh, yes, but that and her good manners are rather exaggerated. It is amazing how the County has accepted her. She gives herself insufferable airs."

"Her daughter will never be comparable to her, yet she is very taking too. I know my son is inclined to make a fool of himself about her, very annoying to me."

"Of course. Mr. Everard would be a great catch for Valerie Stapylton, but her mother holds up her head as if she were superior to every one. She even treats me '*de haut en bas*.'"

"That is too amusing," cried Mrs. Everard, laughing heartily. "You really ought to put her down."

Here the sound of approaching steps on the gravel and voices outside interrupted her, and the next

moment Miss Neville appeared and stepped in through the window, followed by a stout, square, well set-up, soldierly-looking man of sandy complexion and grizzled red hair. He had shrewd, honest, light-gray eyes, and thick gray mustaches. He held a riding-whip with which he occasionally struck his leg to emphasize his speech.

"We have captured two cavaliers, Aunt Harriet," said Miss Neville, "and have brought them in to tea."

"How do you do, Sir Robert." Lady Hazelhurst rose to shake hands with her visitor. "I expected to see Lady Stapylton this afternoon."

"Oh, she has a headache; heat always upsets her, and I expect Mudie's box, just arrived, has been too strong a temptation to stay at home. I've told them to send over the pony carriage for our truant, as I wanted to ride in another direction."

Here Valerie Stapylton came in accompanied by a slight young man of middle height, with dark hair and eyes, the latter laughing and rather restless. His face was somewhat narrow, but a drooping mustache, a little lighter than his hair, concealed its real character. He had an air of distinction, and was evidently dressed by an artistic tailor.

"Lord Rupert!" exclaimed Lady Hazelhurst, "I did not know you had returned; I am very glad to see you. We were afraid you might not be here for the ball."

"You may be sure I would not miss it on any account," he returned, in a cold, refined voice.

"How is the Marquis?" asked Lady Hazelhurst.

"I think I may say quite well. There really was

nothing the matter with him. Too keen a love of truffles, lobster mayonnaise, paté de fois gras, etc., brought on a bad fit of indigestion. You know he has no more power of resistance against temptation than a two-year-old baby."

"So you had your journey for nothing?"

"Just so; and Paris is odious in August. It is in the hands of barbarians!"

"Let me introduce Sir Robert Stapylton to you, Mrs. Everard. You know Lord Rupert Manvers."

Mrs. Everard beamed upon the General, and expressed her pleasure at meeting him. "You were away when I was down in the spring," she said. "I hope you find Eden Lodge a comfortable residence."

"So much so that I think of buying it."

"Yes, pray do, Sir Robert; then I should always have Val as a neighbor. By the way, why need she go home this evening? We have some knotty points still to discuss, and Lady Stapylton has a whole box full of books to amuse her."

"Aye, but what is to become of me?"

"Is there nothing in Mudie's selection to amuse you also? Do, dear Sir Robert, let Val stay with me, and to-morrow I will drive her over to luncheon myself, and play a game of tennis with you."

"Ah! No resisting such a pleader! Hey, Manvers? But I can tell you that Lady Stapylton and myself are very dull when Val is away."

"I never could fancy being dull with Lady Stapylton."

"Well, Miss Neville, you'll be sure to bring my girlie back to-morrow, and I'll let her stay."

"Trust me, Sir Robert! you are a dear!"

"I hope Lady Stapylton will not be displeased," said Lady Hazelhurst, stiffly.

Meantime Mrs. Everard was speaking apart to Lord Rupert.

"I was so surprised to find that you had exchanged into the infantry, though this regiment—what do you call it?"

"The Northumbrian Borderers!"

"Is quite a crack corps. How do you like it after such a distinguished regiment as the—the Hussars?"

"It is rather slow, but not half bad." Then, "Needs must, you know; my brother would not put me straight unless I left the cavalry. Now I am a regular good boy, turned over a new leaf, and all that sort of thing."

"Ah! I have heard sad stories about you. My son will be very happy to show you the country. You must come over to Dallington; we hope to have a good deal of partridge-shooting next month; they tell me the birds are very plentiful. Doesn't Colonel Conway command your regiment? Yes, I thought so. He and Mr. Everard used to be at school together. But we have only just escaped from town, and my husband has not yet been able to call upon him."

The two streams of talk followed on, while John brought and dispensed fresh tea.

"I am glad we have this new regiment just now," said Margaret Neville to the General. "The last one I am told (for we did not know any of them) were all steady married men who never danced or went anywhere."

"And you prefer unsteady, unmarried fellows, eh,

mademoiselle?" said Sir Robert. "That's a pretty confession."

"I am sure I do not care whether they are steady or not, I want them to dance untiringly and wear their red coats to make my ball look bright! And, oh, dear Sir Robert, do please wear all your orders and stars and things!"

"Lady! to hear is to obey," said the General, gallantly.

"Used you to read Byron when you were young, Sir Robert?"

"Who, me? no, not much; I suppose I did, though, like every one else."

"But you have just quoted Byron, 'To hear is to obey.'"

"Oh! I have heard the saying, but I'm sure I never knew who originated it."

"That is shocking! Val and I must take you in hand and educate you, General!"

"I am too old to learn, my dear young lady. When I was young I had my romantic time, like the rest, and——"

"There's an echo of it left, dear Dad!" said his daughter, handing him a cup of tea.

"Ah, you saucy monkey; you are always ready to cheek your Dad."

"No, Sir Robert; you are loved and revered. Remember you must dance the Cotillon with me."

"Done, my darling. Now I must be off. Lady Hazelhurst, pray send home this child of mine without fail. By the way, Lord Rupert, has young Brown returned?"

"No; I think he had an extension of leave."

"I suppose he'll call as soon as he comes back?"

"No doubt."

"I am longing to see Mr. Brown; he is my father's special pet," said Valerie.

"Why?" asked Margaret.

"Because he is the making of a first-rate commanding officer, and is a thorough-going, fearless Englishman," replied Sir Robert.

"Very plucky fellow," said Lord Rupert, "has the Victoria Cross, and but for him I should not have the pleasure of taking tea with you, or with any one else."

"How?" asked Margaret.

"He saved my life at Shakdara," said Manvers shortly.

"He must be delightful," cried Margaret, "you must bring him to my ball."

"Don't think he will be of much use," returned Lord Rupert, with a thin laugh. "I fancy he has very few drawing-room accomplishments. Brown is a good fellow, but he rose from the ranks."

"He is a wonderfully nice fellow into the bargain," cried Sir Robert.

"Did he get the Victoria Cross for saving Lord Rupert's life?" asked Margaret.

"I don't think it was quite worth such a reward," observed Manvers.

"How did he get it, Sir Robert?" persisted Mrs Everard.

"Oh, it was when we forced the pass at Shakdara. We were considered outnumbered, and riddled with

shot, especially from some guns on a height to the left; Brown was doing aide-de-camp for me, we had so few officers to spare.

"As the poor fellows were dropping round us, he said, 'If we could get a few men together, and climb up that hill, sir, so as to turn the enemy's flank, we might use their guns against themselves, and we can always manage twice our own number of Asiatics at close quarters.' I rode back a bit with him, and saw that a party of very resolute men might accomplish the feat; but it would be a desperate one. 'How will you climb with spurs, Sergeant?' said I. 'Take them off, sir. Hoping to win another pair.' And I felt as I looked in his face that the young fellow was of the winning sort. Well, we picked out a handful of first-rate fellows from the different corps, and away they went, while we made a fierce charge in front to distract the enemy's attention. Before Brown and his men reached the guns, however, they were discovered, and the last few hundred yards had to fight, as well as climb, but they won, in spite of everything, and we were soon relieved from the big balls that plunged in among us. It was the next day though, just as we debouched on the open country, that Manvers there, being well mounted, got too far in front and was surrounded by those devils of hillmen. Brown dashed in to help him, and would have been killed too, only our cavalry made a division just then in another part of the fight and their assailants beat a sudden retreat."

"My horse was shot," put in Lord Rupert, "and so was I rather badly wounded; but Sergeant Brown managed to get me on to his charger, and he got me

back safe, not without a single combat or two with retreating horsemen."

"How grateful you and your people must be to Sergeant Brown," remarked Margaret thoughtfully.

"But if he has been a common soldier, risen from the ranks as you call it, he will scarcely know how to behave in society," said Lady Hazelhurst uneasily; "perhaps we had better not ask him."

"Oh, Brown is naturally a gentleman," said Sir Robert.

"And for the last two or three years he has dined at Mess," added Lord Rupert.

"So I suppose he will not put his knife in his mouth," said Valerie laughing.

"I shall ask him if he came in fustian," said Margaret decidedly.

"You have tempted an old soldier to fight his battles o'er again, and prose, while he ought to be riding home. Forgive this long visit, Lady Hazelhurst."

"But we asked you to tell us everything, General," cried Margaret.

"A most interesting graphic description, I am sure," observed Mrs. Everard; "at the same time, he is a very lucky young man."

"Yes, he'll soon get his company," added Manvers.

But Sir Robert was making his adieux, and with a hearty kiss to his daughter, departed, the girls going to the door to see him off.

"Aunt Harriet," said Margaret when they returned, "do ask Lord Rupert to stay to dinner; I want his advice and help about the Cotillon things. I do not think we have half enough."

"Yes, pray dine with us, Rupert!" urged Lady Hazelhurst, who was his cousin.

"Many thanks. I will ride back to barracks to dress, and be with you at 7.30—your dinner hour, I think." And with a pleased look on his dark face he departed, followed by Mrs. Everard.

When the two young friends retired that night Margaret sat down by the open window in Valerie's room, and gazed out at the moonlight, casting deep shadows and streaks of silver on the lawn.

"Your father is a good raconteur, Val," she said, after a silence of some minutes. "What ideas of difficulty and resource and daring his story suggested. Rupert Manvers seems to have had his share of hair-breadth 'scapes. But he does not give the idea of a dashing soldier."

"A man's a man for a' that," returned Val, shaking down her golden locks; "few healthy men are cowardly."

"No, no! I never accused poor Lord Rupert of that, only he is so cold."

"Perhaps some day you will find that he is not so cold," returned Valerie.

"What a lot of hair you have. Do ring for Gibbs to brush it, you can never manage it yourself. I think we have nearly settled everything. What a pity this heroic Brown is not a gentleman. I suppose he drops his h's and——"

"Why! is this the radical reforming, socialistic Margaret," broke in Valerie, laughing, as she rang the bell; "I thought you were quite superior to such trifles as style, manner, pronunciation!"

"I ought to be!" with a sigh. "I ought to feel as if all men were brothers; but I don't, except in theory. I am an inconsistent creature; still it seems hard that the accident of birth should confer such advantages. It is said to be burdened with these prejudices, the result of training."

"Come, Marge, dear, you cannot see through everything at eighteen, or eighteen less a week; but your heart will keep you right. Marge. Go to bed, dear; you are looking pale, and here is Gibbs."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Caresford Court Ball was the event of that autumn ; nothing so important socially had occurred in the county since Jack Harrington Everard came of age.

The fine old house of the Nevilles lent itself admirably to such an entertainment as the ball, which celebrated Miss Neville's entrance into society.

The following spring she was to be presented ; but she particularly wished to make her *début* in her own house, and among her friends and neighbors.

The large lofty hall, with a fine double staircase at the back, leading to a gallery and the rooms on the upper floor, was turned into a temporary garden, graceful palm trees hid the walls, and a clump of tropical ferns formed the center, small parterres of brilliant flowers and cool green leafage filled the corners. The larger of the two large drawing-rooms was the ball-room, the long, spacious library, paneled with cedar, was devoted to a sumptuous supper, and the dining-room to refreshment. Flowers, foliage, pictures, china, statuary, bronzes, the accumulation of more than one century, adorned the rooms.

At the door of the white, or smaller saloon, stood Lady Hazelhurst to receive her guests in the traditional black velvet of dowagerhood, and sparkling with

the Hazelhurst diamonds, which Margaret was far too courteous and kindly to appropriate during her aunt's life, as she was entitled to do.

Varied and numerous were the expressions of admiration addressed to the hostess on the success of her arrangements, and for a little while her ladyship was agreeably cheated into a belief in her own taste, and forgetfulness that she only shone in the reflected radiance of the true owner, to her a detestable reality.

Margaret, in pearly white satin, and delicate dreamy white lace, stood beside her for some time. Her big brown eyes alight with cordial pleasure as she received the compliments and congratulations of the guests.

"Oh! Here are the Stapyltons," said Manvers, who, as a relative and intimate, assisted Lady Hazelhurst in the duties of reception. "By Jove! how handsome she is! The daughter is not a patch on her."

"She is quite charming enough!" said Margaret.

Lady Stapylton was above the average height, the grace and symmetry of her figure, as yet untouched by the deforming touch of middle-age, her abundant hair, though less golden than in youth, was too light in color to show the sprinkling of gray which possibly mingled in its masses. Her face was grand as well as handsome with a suspicion of sternness in its expression, until she smiled, when it changed to a look of youthful sweetness, infinitely attractive. She was dressed in crimson and black brocade, the short sleeves and low bodice of which would have amply displayed her still snowy neck and arms but for the drapery of filmy black Brussels lace, which shrouded them. Her

hair was held back by a classic coronet of diamonds, before which those of the hostess paled, and a brilliant pendant of the same gems hung from a row of single stones round her neck.

"My dear Lady Hazelhurst," she exclaimed in a rich voice, somewhat deeper than the tones of ordinary women, "how delightfully you have decorated your hall! I do not think I have ever seen anything so charming except in Vienna. Margaret, my dear child, you are a fairy queen of the revels. May all your succeeding birthdays bring you happy memories and an unclouded future."

"Thank you, dearest Lady Stapylton," returned the débutante, kissing her and then Valerie, a favor she vouchsafed to no other guest. After exchanging a few more sentences the Eden Lodge party passed on, and the open bars of the first dance sounded from the next room.

"They are waiting for us, Miss Neville," said young Everard coming up, card in hand, a rubicund and rather herculean youth, who looked what he was, "a mighty hunter," and by his position in the county entitled to open the ball with the heiress of Caresford.

"I am quite ready; Lord Rupert, have you a partner?"

"No!"

"Then do go and ask Valerie Stapylton, and be our vis-à-vis."

"If you will give me the next?"

"Yes, yes; but where is your colonel, and where are your brother officers? We shall be short of men if they do not come."

"Oh! they are sure to be here. The mess dined earlier on purpose to come in good time, but remember it is more than a seven mile drive up and down hill."

The ball was well started when an influx of red-coats and gold lace came to increase its brilliancy.

"Certainly a sprinkling of uniform is a great improvement," said Mrs. Everard to Lady Stapylton, beside whom she was sitting. "I confess I have rather a weakness for soldiers; my second boy has just joined the —th Hussars. Of course, Jack belongs to the land, as my brother Ballymore says, indeed he would never do for the Light Dragoons. These men are very smart for an infantry regiment. The Borderers are quite a crack corps."

"So, I believe. I am sure from what I have seen of their extravagance when I was in India, I should call such regiments 'cracked corps.'"

Mrs. Everard laughed a jolly fat laugh. "Some of them are decidedly good-looking," she went on, raising her double glass to her eyes, "and there, to the left, leaning against that pillar, that is a remarkably handsome young man, quite princely in style."

Lady Stapylton looked where Mrs. Everard pointed, but did not reply immediately.

"I wonder who he is? I heard a son of the Earl of Wilmington was to join the Regiment soon (the Wilmingtons, you know, have hardly an acre left, but they are all handsome)."

"Yes, he is good looking, and reminds me of some one I have met. Faces are very puzzling."

"They are indeed. It is perfectly amazing how the Prince of Wales remembers every one. It is quite a

royal gift. Fortunately for the possessors, Providence has been so appropriately bountiful."

"Don't you find it very warm?" asked Lady Stapylton, fanning herself slowly with a large feather fan.

"Well, no, not so warm as one might expect. The room is very crowded. There, that tall, well-set-up man, with iron gray hair, is Colonel Conway. He is an old chum of Mr. Everard's. Oh, here is Sir Robert Stapylton. Pretty scene, is it not, Sir Robert? It is pleasant to see young people enjoying themselves."

"So pleasant it makes me feel young myself."

"Sir Robert is blessed with eternal boyhood," said his wife with a swift, sweet smile. "I am feeling the heat a good deal! Will you take me into the Hall?" and she rose.

"Gad! you are as white as a sheet!" looking earnestly at her, "you never treated me to a faint yet, don't begin now."

"Do not fear. I shall see you again presently, Mrs. Everard," she took her husband's arm, and went towards the Hall, on which the ball-room opened.

"Better, eh?" asked Sir Robert, with kindly solicitude as they reached the fresher air.

"Yes, much better! I am so easily affected by heat since I lived in India."

"Come and sit near the window."

"How do you do, Lord Rupert? This is quite a sylvan scene."

"Yes, isn't it uncommonly well done! Come and have an ice, Lady Stapylton."

"Thank you, no. It is rather too soon to refresh."

Several other acquaintances stopped to speak, as many used the great Hall as a passage to the white saloon, the card, and refreshment-rooms. Presently Sir Robert suggested going into the card-room, as his soul hungered for whist.

"No, thank you, but you need not stay here with me, dear! I will go and look for Val. Oh! by-the-way, is your favorite Victoria Cross man tall and fair and handsome, with a fine carriage, and——"

"Yes, that's him!" exclaimed the general with ungrammatical readiness. "Fine young fellow, eh? I'll just bring him up and introduce him to you. Mind you ask him to stay next week. He'll be the better for our backing, though he is a V.C.," and the good-natured general fussed away to find his protégé.

Lady Stapylton sat quite still, looking down on her fan, a charming picture against a background of ferns. She was but a few seconds alone, when Margaret Neville came through the door of the ball-room, and, dismissing her partner, took her seat by Lady Stapylton.

"You ought to dance, too," she exclaimed. "I am sure you would move through a minuet with infinite grace."

"Thank you! I have danced a minuet in my time, not so badly, they said."

"I wish we had arranged to have a minuet to-night, but one cannot think of everything."

Meantime Sir Robert soon found his friend standing alone and looking at the groups which were gathering for the lancers.

"Not dancing, Brown?"

"No sir, I am not long come. We were presented 'en masse' by the Colonel to the lady of the house, and as yet no one has introduced me to a partner."

"Come along, my boy! I will introduce you to my Lady and Miss Stapylton; no, I can't now, she is just standing up with Jack Everard. Never mind, every girl in the room will be pleased to dance with a V. C.," and Sir Robert led the way to where he had left his wife.

"I am afraid if the V. C. is socially unknown, he will not be in such request," said Brown, with an easy smile.

"Oh, damn your social standing," said the general, "a man's a man for a' that," and you have proved yourself one."

"Oh, I don't mind how many dukes or earls I meet, but I confess I am not a little afraid of these fine ladies. They seem to belong to another world from the one I have been accustomed to."

"Pooh, stuff! Faint heart never won fair lady."

These words brought them to where Lady Stapylton and Margaret Neville were sitting under the palms in the hall.

"Here is my friend Brown, my lady, of whom I have often spoken to you, Lieutenant Brown, Lady Stapylton. Hope it will be Captain before long."

"I am very pleased to meet you," replied her ladyship, with a sort of queenly graciousness, "we are all familiar with your name." She held out her hand, which he took with a bow that surprised Margaret, who was watching with not unkindly interest the manner and bearing of a man who had "risen from the

ranks." His bow was quite well-bred, a little stiffer perhaps than Rupert Manvers', but, then, he looked so soldier-like that it seemed right and natural.

"You are very good," he said, "Sir Robert has been my best friend; I am deeply indebted to him for his help and kindness."

His voice was soft, but deep, and had a musical ring, nor was there anything common in the accent.

"The next thing is to find a partner, Brown," said the general. "Miss Neville, let me introduce Mr. Brown to you; Val is dancing, so I must ask you to be so good as to find him a partner."

"Certainly, Sir Robert," raising her eyes with a frank inquiring look, straight into the young soldier's, for, with all her liberal ideas, she felt the depth and width of the gulf which separated her status from his; something of startled admiration, which she felt rather than perceived, in his answering glance, brought the color to her cheek, though it in no way confused her. "Will you dance with me, Mr. Brown?"

"Most gladly, Miss Neville, and gratefully," another almost haughty bow.

"I suppose, as it is my birthday, and my ball, I may be permitted to select some of my cavaliers, Lady Stapylton."

"Of course, you may do what you like, my dear Margaret, especially on such an occasion."

Margaret looked at her card. "They are dancing the lancers now; the next is a waltz; I see I am engaged to Lord Rupert, but that is no matter; his engagements are only provisional, he is doing steward, or master of the ceremonies."

"By the way, you can dance, Brown, eh? You know I have only seen you move to the music of the guns," said Sir Robert a little anxiously.

"I should not have dared to impose on Miss Neville's good nature had I not been sure at least of not impeding her progress, or treading on her feet."

"I know you have an ear for music. He sings a capital song, I can tell you," to his wife. "Barrack-room ditties, of course, but he often kept the men of his troop in cantonments of a night with his singing."

Brown laughed good-humoredly. "I don't think Lady Stapylton would call my singing music," he said; "one of the great attractions of my comrades was joining in a loud chorus."

"I should so much like to hear you sing, Mr. Brown," returned Lady Stapylton, earnestly. "I hope you will come over and stay a few days with us. Sir Robert, pray arrange with Mr. Brown when he can give us the pleasure of a visit."

"Yes, we'll settle that."

"Pray, did you ever study the art of singing?" continued Lady Stapylton, looking steadily at him.

"When quite a boy I learned to sing church music, but I forget it now. Latterly I have adopted a very different line. Of course nowadays I rarely or ever sing."

"That is a pity; a fine voice is a golden gift." Lady Stapylton spoke a little longer to him, and then the sound of a delicious waltz came to them.

"The dance you have so graciously given to me,"

said Brown, offering his arm to Margaret, his eyes seeking hers with a grave wondering admiration which amused but attracted her.

"I hope he can dance," she thought. "I should not like to be the upset of my own birthday ball! I wonder what his idea of dancing is? Something very vigorous, I suppose?"

"Isn't this my waltz, Miss Neville," said Lord Rupert, stopping them.

"It was, but Mr. Brown had no other partner, so he is obliged to dance with me."

"What a tremendous obligation!" cried Manvers, laughing; "well, remember you owe me one."

The next moment Brown put his arm round her and they were off.

"Yes! There was no mistake about it, Brown could dance, steady, and moving in perfect time, ready by dexterous turns and an occasional closer grasp of his lithe, pliant partner to save her from any collision, for the dance was crowded. Margaret never had enjoyed a waltz so much. Sometimes as she glanced at the handsome strong face above her she tried to think how it looked when he led his men up the heights to capture the guns which were working havoc among his fellows. There was no trace of roughness about him, nor a touch of the uncouth boldness which might be the alternative of awkward shyness. He seemed ready to go on forever, too.

"Do you want to rest?" he asked presently, without pausing.

"No, thank you. It is dreadfully crowded, but I love this 'Tausend und ein Nacht.' There is no

waltz like it. Oh, take care of Mr. Everard, he is so awkward!"

"Don't be afraid; give yourself to me," and as he swung her free from a collision with Jack Everard, who was plunging wildly round the room with the Rector's daughter, he naturally held her very close indeed. His words, and perhaps unconscious action, sent a strange half-painful thrill such as she had never felt before through her veins; it startled and vexed her. It was something to forget, and to hide even from herself.

"You must stop now," exclaimed Brown, with a sort of deferential authority—if such a thing can be—"you are tired; I felt you tremble." Margaret blushed crimson for a second at the accusation, but she did not contradict it, and they stood aside for a moment or two.

"But you dance very well," she exclaimed, after a brief silence.

"I danced a good deal at one time. Sir Robert does not know what smart balls the cavalry sergeants get up; some of their wives and daughters dance very well, too."

"You were in the cavalry, Sir Robert told us. Did you not like it better than the infantry?"

"It is not what you like, but what you are given," said Brown; I was gazetted to the Borderers. "But I hope to return to India, and get into some irregular cavalry corps."

"Would you prefer to live in India rather than England?"

"England is no place for a professional soldier, Miss

Neville. There is always some fighting to be done in India."

Margaret was silent. "But to be away from all your friends and relations?"

"My friends are chiefly in India, and I have no relations anywhere."

Margaret felt somehow that she ought not to have mentioned relations, and hastened to exclaim, "Oh! they are no great loss! Mine bore me dreadfully! There is none of them I love half so well as Val Stapylton."

"Sir Robert's daughter! Is she dancing? Pray point her out to me."

"That tall girl in white, with violets and green leaves, with hair very like yours," glancing up at him.

"Yes, I see; she is more like her father than Lady Stapylton; she is lovely!"

"Yes, and charming."

"She impressed me greatly," then, after a pause, looking round—

"What an exquisite house this is! I never was in one like it before, never in any English 'Ancestral home.' It is a sort of revelation to me. The memory of this evening will live in my mind for many a day, even if I never see it again."

"Oh, but I hope you will, Mr. Brown," cried Margaret gaily. "It is a sweet old house, but when you come to see us by daylight you will like the outside best. There is an avenue of lime trees which is quite a dream of beauty. I dearly love my home, and design many improvements, when I come of age."

"Why, is it all yours?" asked Brown with a look of

surprise at the slight girlish creature who reached little above his elbow, adding, "Pray forgive my abruptness."

"Oh, never mind. Yes, it is all mine, and I think it rather hard that I do not inherit my father's title, too."

"Of course it is," he returned. Brown had only rejoined the day before, and knew nothing about the social life of Blankfordshire or the history of its magnates. A slight smile passed over his face as he thought of St. John's Wood and his good, kind granie and Jane, and much else, and here he was careering round this grand ball-room with an heiress of high degree in his arms. Aye, more than an heiress, a dainty, delicious darling, with bewitching eyes and such a kissable mouth. More, with such a charm of simplicity and refinement as he never before knew could exist. Could this heavenly experience ever be repeated? "Are you inclined for another turn, Miss Neville?" he asked respectfully, anxious to secure that at least. So they whirled off again, and kept going until the music ceased.

Then Margaret introduced her partner to Miss Stapylton, and was herself swept away by a guest staying in the house, the heir of a ducal coronet, but he danced vaguely, weakly, and finally took her in to supper, where was much eating, drinking, talking, and an old-fashioned baronet, ranking next in importance to the Nevilles, proposed the fair *débutante's* health, somewhat to Lady Hazelhurst's annoyance. She thought it a noisy proceeding, more suited to a tenants' ball than an entertainment to the *élite* of the county.

The proposal was rapturously responded to, then, to Brown's delight, a small white figure rose and said, clearly and simply, "Thank you, dear Sir Willoughby. Thank you all from my heart. Your very good health, and may we often meet."

This without a shade of embarrassment—and she raised a glass of champagne to her lips.

More plaudits and champagne, and a louder buzz of talk than ever.

Then the band struck up again, and all the young people hurried away for the cotillon. Margaret kept her promise to lead it with the general, but the changes of that variegated dance gave Brown some splendid opportunities, even more than he dared to take advantage of. But though Margaret was careful to distribute her favors impartially, she voluntarily gave two or three turns to the Victoria Cross man who had risen from the ranks.

Once she openly preferred him to Manvers, who was by no means pleased. Margaret soon settled the question.

"Why, Lord Rupert, you are doing the host! and you must not take precedence of a guest."

"I must not question the decision of the Queen of the Ball," he returned, with a black look, and walked away. Margaret looked at Brown with a delightful, mischievous little nod, as if she were taking him into her confidence, and whirled away on his arm.

But the dwellers at a distance began to say good night, and the ebb-tide of departure had set in. Amongst the last to leave was Brown, who assisted Lady Stapylton and Valerie to find their wraps, prom-

ising to dine at the Lodge on the following Tuesday, and remain till Saturday.

Then he said good night to his peerless partner.

Day was dawning when he reached his rooms, but in spite of the hours of dancing in a heated atmosphere he did not attempt to go to bed and sleep ; every pulse, every fiber in his frame was instinct with life, and throbbed with excitement.

He threw off his warm tunic and put on a light jacket, threw open the window and sat down beside it to smoke and meditate.

Since he had returned from London the day before he had not had a moment to himself ; now he mentally ran over the incidents of his visit to the capital, which he had left more than eight years before, and " behold, all was very good."

The warm, enthusiastic greeting from his good friend and ex-guardian, Dr. Macnab, and his delightful sympathetic wife, who did not seem to Hugh Brown a day older, his former playfellows' shy recognition and slight awe of the soldierly, distinguished-looking visitor, all was delightful. Then came the pleasant task of going through the accounts of his stewardship, which the doctor insisted on laying before him.

Poor, faithful, careful Jane was at rest beside her mistress, and handsome headstones recorded their names with an appropriate text of Scripture, erected by their " grateful and attached Hugh Brown." The successful lodging-house in St. John's Wood, with its well-preserved furniture, had been advantageously sold, and Hugh found the fruits of his self-denying life in a small yearly income, without which supple-

ment to his pay it would have been difficult to hold out in an English regiment. Now, the two kindly souls who had fostered and reared him, dead and gone, he stood absolutely alone, without a soul in the world who had the slightest claim upon him, or on whom he had any. There was a certain strength in the loneliness, and generally it troubled Hugh very little. He was ambitious, and most resolutely determined to climb upwards ; but small successes, small triumphs seemed very little worth to him. He only strove to do what would raise him in the estimation of grave, thoughtful men, who knew the value of a capable, foreseeing character. Hugh was fortunate in the nature with which he had been endowed. Pleasure to him was always allied to effort, struggle, danger. To train and subdue, not by any severity, an ill-tempered horse, to go after big game as he had occasionally had a chance of doing in India, these were his greatest joys. To women he was unusually, and for himself most happily, indifferent, though they by no means returned the indifference. Nevertheless, he had no dislike or distrust of them, indeed their presence was pleasant to him. Music was his soft point. "The concord of sweet sounds" always produced an extraordinary enervating effect upon him of which he was conscious but could not resist.

Hitherto he had felt on the whole well satisfied with life, and was probably on the road to be a successful and self-centred man, but this night was the beginning of a new day to him.

He had known nothing of women's society in the grade to which he had of late been admitted, and the

charm, the easy, unaffected grace of those he had encountered at "Caresford Court" Ball were, indeed, a revelation to him.

Dismissing all other thoughts he gave himself up to live over again the heavenly delight of dancing with Margaret Neville. She alone of all he had yet known, had conveyed to him a sense of superiority. Beside this dainty high-bred darling he felt clumsy, uncouth, and common. Yet this superiority did not hurt him. He liked to feel that she was far above him. How kindly she had looked when with girlish grace she had given him a dance. It was intoxicating to remember it—the soft, slight form that leant against his arm in some of the sudden turns of the waltz. The lustrous eyes sometimes pensive, sometimes mischievous, that looked so frankly up to his, the sweet red-lipped mouth, that smiled with so much tender thoughtfulness. He was almost ashamed of the passionate longing to kiss those lovely lips, with long, lingering kisses, which fevered his blood. How dare he think thus of this fair, innocent girl. God knows these wild imaginings in no way diminished the reverence he felt for her, but for the first time a new, bewildering light burst upon him, and he understood all that poets, aye, and graver writers into the bargain, had written—he formerly said raved—about the master-passion of the race.

"It won't do to indulge in such fancies," he mused. "They are sheer madness, I can never realize them, and they will take all the strength and reason out of me. It is all right to fight hard for what it is possible to win, but it is only common-sense to renounce the unattainable, and I will. It is not likely that

Margaret Neville will remember me an hour after I am out of her sight, or dream that she gave the first taste of divine pleasure that he had ever known, to a man who rose from the ranks. I must put her out of my head and my heart. God send you a happy, cloudless life, my queen!

"Would to heaven I could call some honest tradesman and his wife, some toil-worn laborer and his, father and mother; anything rather than this dread of being the son of some abandoned woman and some dissolute, useless man of pleasure. It is the one bitter drop in my cup, but at times it flavors the whole draught! Why, what woman, among the sort of women I should like to marry, would care for a husband who was a mere waif!" He drew down the blind, and turned into bed to snatch a brief slumber, but really to resume in dreams the waltz which opened to him a new world of exquisite pain and pleasure.

CHAPTER IX.

"FOR my part," said Lady Hazelhurst to her guest and relative, Mrs. Manvers, wife of Lord Rupert's first cousin, as they rose from luncheon, "I consider it the worst possible taste to wear such an overpowering amount of diamonds, especially as they have been the gifts of her admirers to Irma de Retz, the singer and actress, not presents from Sir Robert Stapylton to his wife."

It was the day after the ball, and a sultry morning, with occasional mutterings of thunder in the distance.

"I suppose you are right," returned Mrs. Manvers, a quiet, undecided little woman easily convinced by positive people.

"I do not think Aunt Harriet is," put in Margaret, who was busy cutting up some chicken for her aunt's pet Yorkshire terrier, a pearl-gray atom with long silky hair. "I think I would be very proud of such tokens of the admiration I had won, and when they are her very own! not merely heirlooms of which one has only a life use."

"Really, Margaret, my dear, you have the most radical, the most eccentric ideas! You quite distress me, my love."

"I am very sorry, but I suppose I cannot help it.

It must be so charming to fascinate hundreds of people by one's singing and acting," she added reflectively.

"Nevertheless there are very few even of the most successful among the great artistes who would not gladly exchange with you," observed Lord Rupert, who had wandered to the window in order to observe the threatening sky.

"I should not, were I one! Wherever they go they carry their great gifts with them. Separate Margaret Neville from Caresford Court, and she would be insignificant enough."

"That is an elaborate bit of fishery," said Manvers laughing. "You must know that with or without Caresford you are a fascinating little personality."

"No, I do not," carelessly. "Oh, Pearl, you naughty dog, you must not drag your bones off your plate! Lord Rupert——"

"How formal you are, Miss Neville. Considering our relationship I think you might drop the courtesy title."

"You are a connection, not a relation, Lord Rupert; Lady Hazelhurst is your kinswoman."

"He is very heavy and awkward," Lady Hazelhurst was saying, when Margaret listened.

"Who is?" she asked.

"Young Everard, of course," said Manvers.

"He may be, but I am very fond of him. There is something so true and honest in him."

"Margaret, my dear, I wish you would not exaggerate. How can you be fond of a young gentleman you know so little?"

"Your brother officers seem a very nice gentleman-like set, Rupert," remarked Mrs. Manvers.

"They are not half bad," he returned.

"And what a handsome man that Mr. Brown is," cried Miss Jennings, one of the house-party.

"He looks quite like a gentleman, too," added her sister.

"I would have liked to examine his Cross," said a young Foreign Office clerk, who was staying in the house, "but he looks rather stiff and stand-off."

"I suppose you and Mr. Brown are very devoted to each other?" resumed Miss Jennings, addressing Lord Rupert. "The general told us how he saved your life."

"We don't fall on each other's necks when we meet, nor are we chums, as our tastes and habits are, not unnaturally, totally different; but, of course, I never forget that I owe my life to him. He is a quiet, reserved fellow, determined to get on, and that sort of thing."

"Where does he come from?" asked Lady Hazelhurst.

"I believe he is a Londoner. That does not tell much; London is a world in itself."

"How strange it must seem to him to be received in a house like this," said Miss Jennings.

"He seemed to keep his senses wonderfully, under the circumstances," exclaimed Margaret, laughing.

"Yes, in some ways he is a cool hand. He was asked out occasionally when the regiment was in Bombay, and from the time he joined us, of course he dined always at mess."

"Oh, that is all very well," said Lady Hazelhurst. "These sort of people ought to be noticed and rewarded, but I must say I think Sir Robert Stapylton is exceedingly unwise and Quixotic to invite him to stay in his house. One cannot expect Lady Stapylton to be very particular, considering what her own life was; but as Valerie is a rather self-willed girl, and the young man would no doubt think her a great match, she might be drawn in to marry him."

"Was Lady Stapylton's life so very bad?" asked Margaret, opening her eyes with an innocent look.

"My dear Margaret! How can you ask such a thing? Do you think I should have invited her to my house if there had been anything against her? I believe very few women on the stage had a better reputation, still she could not have the sort of standard we have!"

"There are some curious people amongst us who do not seem to have any standard at all," remarked Margaret reflectively. Lord Rupert burst out laughing.

"You are quite right, Miss Neville," he said. "Do you know it is clearing up. Suppose we ride over to Beaumont Abbey. Miss Jennings ought to see our show ruins, and they leave to-morrow."

"That would be very nice, only I am afraid our stud is rather limited," said Lady Hazelhurst.

"I have two horses here," said Manvers.

"And I do not care to ride," said the younger Miss Jennings.

"Then you must come with Mrs. Manvers and me. We will drive over and meet the equestrians there," suggested Lady Hazelhurst.

"Thank you. It would be very nice!"

"Then I shall stay at home and have a sleep, if you will excuse me," said Margaret, "for I am very tired."

So it was settled, and Margaret secured a few hours for reverie and repose.

Naturally the ball and her partners occupied her thoughts a good deal, and among them her cavalier with the V. C. had the largest share. "How hard it must be to live with people richer than oneself, to be obliged to consider every penny," she mused, "especially for men. Small deprivations must be so much more humiliating to men than to women. But that Mr. Brown looks as if he could stand up against most things. He is not one bit vulgar or common, because he is so simple and straightforward. He would make a capital hero for a novel! Valerie ought to take him for that romance she is trying to plan! After all a battle for life and success must be very exhilarating. Mine will be one dead-level of luxury and pleasure, if I choose to live a life of pleasure! I suppose I shall have a great deal of money when I come of age. They give me so little now there must be great savings. How unjust it seems that I, who deserve nothing in particular, should have everything my heart can desire, and such heaps of girls just as good, perhaps a great deal better (though indeed I am not bad), should have scarcely food to eat, or clothes to wear! What shall I do when I am mistress of my funds? Something to raise the people? A co-operative farm would not be a bad experiment, and most interesting. That professor, what was his name?

whose lecture we heard last spring, described it all delightfully. I wish I knew him, I might write to him. Lady Hazelhurst would think me mad. I'll talk to Val about it; Val is very sensible. I think I am cleverer in some ways than she is, yet I would always do what she advises. She looked so nice at the ball! so bright and happy. How fond her father and mother are of her, and she of them. What a delightful home they have; I hope they will ask me to stay at the Lodge when Lady Hazelhurst goes to see her aunt. I must tell them to keep one of Daisy's pups for Sir Robert," and her thoughts grew dim and vague as sweet sleep stole over her.

The heat, which had almost overpowered Lady Stapylton at the ball, had left her an evil legacy of neuralgic headache, so that she was scarcely out of her room for the next two days.

Like most of Margaret's neighbors, the Stapyltons had filled their house for the ball. But these two days had seen their guests dispersed—the men to the moors and the girls to the continent.

Eden Lodge was a very unpretending little place, pretty, well cared for, and exquisitely comfortable. Its owner was not rich, but in easy circumstances, and his family consisting of one daughter only, he had all the more to lavish on her.

Sir Robert had now been settled in Blankfordshire for nearly two years. His family was well known there, and he was most popular, so was his wife, who was always ready to help the charities by her singing, or recitations, or management of amateur theatricals.

Their small establishment was perfect in every detail, and worked with the ease ensured by punctuality and discipline. Lady Stapylton had the reputation of being a most agreeable woman, in truth she said exceedingly little, but she listened admirably, always putting in a word or two here and there which proved her comprehension and interest.

Lady Hazelhurst was much disappointed and disgusted at the way in which "The County" took the general's wife, an ex-actress, to its capacious bosom, and gave her a standing to which she had no claim, even higher than her own, as she felt, though she would not for worlds have acknowledged it.

Lady Stapylton had a frank way of speaking of her own past, which did more to convince her neighbors that it was a blameless one than anything else, and she was always ready to mention her acquaintance with this Minister or that Serene Highness. Indeed, when the Austrian Ambassador came to Castletown on the occasion of a visit from an archduke curious in manufactures, and both came on to the Lodge to drink tea and have a chat with the charming hostess, every one in Blankfordshire considered it an irrefragable proof of the fair hostess's immaculate reputation.

At any rate Sir Robert was a happy man; no one could doubt that he was his wife's first object, she loved him dearly, his wishes, his interest, his comfort, were her first consideration. To these even Valerie came second.

Her visitors gone, accompanied by the general and his daughter "to speed the parting guests" at the station, she remounted the staircase to her little private

sitting-room, for she had forced herself to do the honors of the luncheon-table, though still in pain.

She was pale, and her fine blue eyes had a weary look. She threw open the window wider and stood by it a moment to inhale the balmy air, which came over a pine wood at the back of the house.

Then she drew a chair to a bureau or *escritoire* which stood in the corner of the room.

She unlocked it and let down a flap which formed a desk, and proceeded to open one or two of the tiny drawers with which the interior was lined. From one she took a flat leather case and a yellow letter. Opening the former she gazed long at the portrait of a young man, in a richly embroidered jacket—a handsome young man with fair hair, and long black eyelashes shading big, sweet, dark-blue eyes. She looked long and tenderly at the fine face, then kissed it softly, and gazed at it again.

"A wonderful likeness," she murmured to herself. "It is impossible to doubt. May God have mercy upon me."

Then she put away the portrait, hastily locked the bureau, and put the key on her watch chain.

She sat still for a while, still as though her heart had ceased to beat. What memories, what visions of past triumphs, trials, struggles, temporary defeat, succeeding victory, barren victory, swept over her soul as she lay back in her *fauteuil*, and heard without listening the soft sweet coo of the wood pigeon, at intervals breaking the exquisite silence of the mellow autumn afternoon!

"Silence!" she murmured at last. "It is heavenly

to be alone, and able to think, if I could only think clearly; but I cannot. To do right! Ah, that I have put out of my power. I must be true to one duty at least. The other I must renounce."

She thought long and profoundly, her great dark eyes strained with a far-away look, as though seeing a dim panorama of past and future.

She did not know how long she had been thus absorbed when Sir Robert opened the door.

"Well, how goes it," he exclaimed cheerily. "They told me you were lying down. What's wrong, my dear? It's not like you to be 'indifferent well,' with your splendid physique. Never saw you look better in my life than at the ball: beat every other woman there, by Jove; yet you have not been right since. Want a little change, eh? A few weeks at the seaside would set you up."

"No, dear old man," she returned, slipping her arm through his. "I am never so well or so happy as in my own home, thanks to you. Of course, you cannot expect me to be so free from slight indispositions as I was eighteen or nineteen years ago."

"Judging from appearance, there is no reason why you should not," exclaimed the general. "Come along. Dress, and come downstairs. It is half-past six. Jack Everard persuaded us to drive round by his stables, at Hillbrook, and see a capital lady's horse he has there. Cheap, too. The very thing for Val. I must look up my bank account, and see if I can afford it this quarter."

"I will look, too!" said Lady Stapylton, laying her hand on his shoulder, with her peculiarly sweet smile.

"I know how little you count the cost of anything for Val or me."

"Ah! you are a regular screw! By the way, I met Brown as we were leaving the station. He had just written to you to say he could not come over on Wednesday. One or two other fellows have to leave, so he cannot be spared. Later on he will be very glad, I fancy, to come."

Their respective duty to their guests kept Valerie and Margaret from meeting till several days after the ball, at least for a gossip concerning it. Margaret was especially engaged, for she held a reception of all the young daughters of the cottagers and workpeople on that portion of the property which lay near her home. To these girls of about her own age she distributed clothing, adding suitable presents for those who had distinguished themselves by any particular industry, care of sick parents, etc., etc. Indeed, Margaret gave some trouble to her guardians by a tendency to lavish gifts, one grim old lawyer declaring that if given her own way she would pauperize any number of parishes.

It was quite a week before Valerie made her appearance at the Court.

Lady Hazelhurst had started rather early to pay a distant visit, and Margaret was alone in the library, curled up in a huge armchair near one of the open windows, through which came the perfume of heliotrope and verbena, and deep in an old volume she had taken from one of the book-shelves near her.

"It seems a whole year since I had a word with you!" cried Val. "Lady Hazelhurst is out? 'Tant mieux.' What are you reading?"

"Le Mort d'Arthur. It is such a curious old book, very quaint, but I get tired of it. I prefer Tennyson on the same subject. Do you know this collection is terribly deficient in modern books? I must add a quantity to it when I come to my kingdom."

"Ah, Margaret, when the sky falls we shall all of us catch larks. There is no end of the wonderful reforms you are going to make. You will soon disperse the accumulations of your minority."

"I suppose I shall! I know I am on the brink of beggary now, my guardians are so horridly stingy. I have been obliged to spend nearly all my quarter's allowance to make up those little presents to the Caresford girls and the small children. Somehow, though everything cost next to nothing, I have got rid of a quantity of money! Still they were all very well pleased and happy!"

"You ought to consult mother, Margaret. She is so clever about money and management. But do not worry about finance. Let us review the fun of the ball. I have never seen you alone since. It was quite lovely. I never enjoyed any dance so much, though Jack Everard all but upset me."

"He did not manage so badly, Val. He just let you go in time, and only came down himself. I rather like Mr. Everard."

"Yes! He is not elegant, but he has very good horses. My dear old dad has just bought me one—a beauty, a bright bay, with black points. I am going to call him Cedric, because of his Saxon coloring."

"That is delightful. I am dying to see your new mount."

"But about the ball," resumed Valerie. "How did you like my father's pet, the V. C. man?"

"He interested and puzzled me. If he was not originally a gentleman, he has become one 'by adoption and grace,' I suppose."

"I think him quite charming," cried Val, with frank enthusiasm. "There is a sort of proud, modest reserve about him that is most unusual. Then he seems so grateful to my father, and—I have not met anyone I liked so much for a long time. He can talk, too."

"Yes, by no means badly. He is evidently a keen observer, but his manners are not conventional. He is slightly abrupt, and seems so in earnest in all he says. There is none of that mocking tone, that belittling of everything which most young men assume. Like Lord Rupert, for instance."

"Lord Rupert is extremely nice and most amusing—quite a man of fashion."

"Exactly," said Margaret, with complete agreement. "I should have liked so much to ask Mr. Brown all about that battle where he won the Cross, and how he felt, but I could not take so great a liberty."

"Oh, I daresay he could not tell. A man hardly knows what he is doing, I fancy, in the excitement of a fight."

"Val, Lady Hazelhurst is going to stay with the Marchioness on Monday; she has been worn out with anxiety about her eldest son, who has been frightfully ill again. They say he cannot live, though he rallies from time to time."

"Then Lord Rupert will be Marquis?"

"I suppose so. Well, Val, as I shall be all alone in this old place will you take me in?"

"Yes, dear Margaret, of course! you know we had agreed about that. My mother and the general are always so pleased to have you."

"I must say, Val, I do envy you your parents, but especially your mother. I have no one at home on whom I can lean; Lady Hazelhurst is so narrow, so commonplace, so—so—oh! I cannot say what she is! and she believes in herself to a degree that drives me wild. She cannot help being ladylike in a way; she never had a chance of being anything else, but she hasn't the soul of a gentlewoman. She never could be a 'grande dame.'"

"No, she is a little tiresome."

"A little!!! Now Mrs. Everard is not at all distinguished in manners or appearance, but she is a lady, she never would do anything shabby or false or rude. Well, I may come to you on Monday afternoon, Val? I have some charming duets for violin and piano, I will bring them with me (Val was no mean proficient on the violin), and I will not bring Laure (her maid), it will crowd you too much. I love the Lodge, it is so homelike, but it is not too large, and I know how to help myself!"

Here the butler announced "Lord Rupert Manvers," and that gentleman entered accompanied by the regimental doctor, who had been away when the ball took place.

"Let me introduce Doctor O'Grady to you, Miss Neville," said Lord Rupert, when he had shaken hands with that young lady. "Miss Stapylton, Dr. O'Grady,

was with us in our famous mountain scimmages. Knows Sir Robert very well. And has Lady Hazelhurst started for Uppingham Castle?"

"No, she has only driven over to see the Willoughbys."

"Oh! I fancied she had gone to pay her visit to my mother. Had a better account from her this morning."

"Do you know, Miss Stapylton, this is not my first introduction to you, though I am afraid I have no place in your memory," said the doctor.

"I cannot say that I remember having had the pleasure of meeting you," returned Val.

The doctor had a rich brogue. He was short and broad, with a round, rosy face, a pair of twinkling dark eyes, and a wide kindly mouth which smiled with a knowing upward curve to the left, giving a wonderfully humorous expression to his countenance.

"Faith, that doesn't mortify me as it ought, but makes me all the happier to have another chance of knowing you! To be sure we were on what might be called intimate terms in those days, for you often sated yourself on me knee, and put your beautiful little arrum round my neck, and, but I'll go no further."

"Oh, Val, what a dreadful account of you," cried Margaret, laughing.

"I suspect then I knew you at rather an early period of my existence, Doctor O'Grady."

"Ay, so it was, my dear young lady. It was when Sir Robert commanded the —th and we were at Chandrapore. You were a beautiful fairy, full of tricks and mischief as a pet fox, and about two, may be three

years old. And your mother, ah! wasn't she the beauty, and usen't she to draw the souls out of our bodies with the voice of her! Ah! those were pleasant days. And they tell me Mrs., I mean Lady Stapylton is as great a beauty as ever. She'll remember me, for it was myself that passed the sentence of separation, as she called it, between her and the general, for I saw you couldn't live in India, so she took you home."

"I am sure my father will be delighted to see you, Doctor O'Grady. Does he know you are here?"

"I am not sure. You see in those days I was attached to the staff, and when the Borderers were coming home I got appointed to that regiment."

Here tea was brought in, and the conversation turned on the county, its sporting capabilities, the approaching races, for which Lord Rupert had entered a horse, and various other topics.

"This is a delightful library of yours, Miss Neville," said O'Grady, looking round when he had finished his third cup of tea.

"It is a pleasant room. I prefer it to any other in the house. In fact it has everything but books!"

"Books! Begad there seems plenty of them too."

"The doctor is a man of action, and by no means a bookworm," observed Manvers.

"I mean that it must be fifty years since any of my predecessors bought a new book," said Margaret, "and I am quite a modern."

"The old books are the best, they tell me. I'm no great judge myself."

"I cannot believe that. Of course, very great
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writers are for all time," returned Margaret. "Shakespeare is quite modern."

"Now that O'Grady has drained the tea-pot, are you inclined for a stroll in the grounds? I should like to show the doctor that curious grotto or tunnel under the mound. No one seems to know what it could have been meant for."

"No, the house and that passage were built by a Neville, of William the Third's time. He was much in Holland, and all the bricks this abode is built of were brought from that country. I think the family were ennobled in that reign. The title is quite modern. Come, Val; let us go out. I will leave word where we are to be found in case Lady Stapylton calls for you."

CHAPTER X.

HUGH BROWN was half amused and wholly pleased to find himself driving towards Eden Lodge on the day which had been at last fixed for his visit to his former general.

As he had said, he felt perfectly assured and at home with men, but with these well-bred, well-born women, he did not feel so much at ease.

He was aware that he lacked the social training to which they were accustomed, and he was rather afraid of making mistakes. He instinctively felt that his safeguards were silence and reserve, at any rate for some time to come, until he had reconnoitered his ground and had in some degree mastered the Shibboleth of his new associates.

In truth he was sorely tempted to talk, and it must be admitted, to contradict many of the opinions uttered by the pleasant, pretty, sweet-voiced young ladies he had danced with at the Caresford Ball, but had restrained himself, and listened in respectful silence.

He had hard work to tear his mind from perpetual conjectures, whether he would, or would not, meet Margaret Neville at the Lodge. He told himself it would be better not; at her own ball, in her own house, she was gracious and kindly beyond what he

could expect, but in the house of another she might only show him the amount of notice good breeding required.

In these new conditions of his life his support and consolation were in the recollection of his admired friend Mrs. Macnab. In his judgment she stood comparison with the greater ladies to whom he had lately been introduced right well, and the memory of his intercourse with her, of the ease, the pleasure, he felt in her society, suggested that he could not be quite ignorant how to behave himself.

He had heard when he called to leave his card at the Court that Lady Hazelhurst was away from home, and he concluded that Miss Neville was also absent. In any case, he was not likely to have asked for her, not being sure that it would be etiquette to do so, as the young lady was alone.

Hugh reached Eden Lodge about an hour before tea-time. He was shown into an untenanted, long, low drawing-room, with a large bay window and a glass door opening on a small conservatory. The Lodge was a comfortable, roomy, unpretending house, with some unexpected stairs here and there, and additions which diversified its outline. It stood on the side of a hill, the beginning of a low range which separated Blankfordshire from the next county, and commanded a wide view.

A pretty sweep of the greenest grass, half lawn and half pleasure-ground, surrounded the house in front, and was divided from a stretch of pasture-land, studded with some clumps of fine beech trees, by a sunk fence. This gave the impression of a park, and the presence

of a few cows and a rough pony did not detract from the peaceful charm of the outlook.

Hugh Brown stood in the bay window which was on the southwest side of the house, and looked over the wooded country below, enjoying the view and the delicious flower-perfumed freshness of the room, which was simply but gracefully furnished.

From this agreeable contemplation he was roused by the words:

"Very pleased to welcome you, Mr. Brown! We hoped you would come to luncheon."

He turned quickly, and found himself face to face with Lady Stapylton.

"I hoped to have been here earlier, but was obliged to see the colonel before I started, and he did not return to barracks until one o'clock," he replied, thinking as he shook hands with his hostess what wonderful eyes she had, how wistfully and searchingly they looked into his.

"Sir Robert will be in soon. He went out shooting this morning with Dr. O'Grady, an old friend of ours, and both are very faithful to my tea-table!"

A pause ensued. Brown was not prepared with any suitable phrase, and his hostess gazed at him as if she had forgotten that she was not alone.

"What a pleasant view," he exclaimed. "A wide outlook is rare in this rather flat part of the country."

"Yes. We are very proud of our view. It was, I think, my chief attraction when Sir Robert first proposed buying the place. Are you very fond of the country, Mr. Brown?"

"I am, though I know very little of country life.

Wimpstead and Richmond were all I had ever seen of grass and trees before I went into the army, and I have been in India nearly ever since."

"India interested me very much, but I was chiefly in the plains. Then I was obliged to return to England with my little girl, so I never had any chance of seeing the hills, where I believe the scenery is very fine."

"It is superb—once seen, it can never be forgotten. It was a revelation to me."

"Then I presume you are a Londoner, Mr. Brown?"

"I am. Never was twenty miles out of it till I joined at Canterbury."

"And since? You have seen a good deal?"

"A good deal, Lady Stapylton."

"And found things sadly different from what you expected?"

"Different—yes, in some ways better, in some worse. I have very little to complain of."

"The strong rarely complain. They know 'that to bear is to conquer one's fate.'"

"That is true, but I am quite content."

"Have you a sister, Mr. Brown? and is she like you?"

"I have no near relations," shortly.

"Ah! you are like me! I had no near, or, indeed, no distant relation that I know of, save one brother. He was all the world to me, and I lost him in the first fulness of his young manhood! I wish every young man to have a loving sister. It is the sweetest relationship."

"I can imagine it is, but I have never known it."

Another pause, and then Brown asked:

"I hope Sir Robert feels no bad results from his wounds. He was badly hit at the end of our expedition to Llakdara."

"He is wonderfully well, thank God, but he has never been quite himself since. His health was really the reason why he retired. Come, Mr. Brown; tea is quite a serious meal with us. We deliberately sit down to it in the breakfast-room. Let us go across the lawn first, and look at the curiosity of our little domain."

Brown followed her through the hall, where she took up a large white parasol, and under its shelter led the way into a small thicket of oaks and pines with an undergrowth of brambles and briars, to a curious, solemn gray stone or fragment of rock, shaped on the top like the double hump of a camel.

"This," said Lady Stapylton, "is generally believed to be a Druid's altar! One unbelieving antiquarian brought down the just ire of all Blankfordshire on his devoted head, by throwing doubts on the theory, but it was generally agreed that his ignorance and pretensions were beneath contempt. It is a strange relic, at all events. See, from this hollow between what look like the horns of the altar, a channel has been rudely cut. This is supposed to carry away the blood of the victims! There was, according to county history, a vast forest all over the plain below, and half-way up the ridge of hills."

"It is quite possible that the story is true," said Brown, examining the stone with interest.

"At all events, I like to believe it, and so does Val. I fancy she resents any doubts on the subject."

They talked for a few minutes about Druids and tradition, and Lady Stapylton observed that her soldier guest seemed fairly well-informed, and certainly intelligent.

Then the sound of a gong recalled them, and in the hall they met the general, O'Grady, and Jack, all three tired and dusty after their tramp among the furrows, and with not too heavy a game-bag.

Then they all sat down to tea, their party being increased by the rector's wife. The tide of talk was at its height when Valerie and Margaret, who had driven over to Castletown, returned.

"They seem to have quite a party," said Valerie, as the sound of voices and laughter came to them through the open door of the breakfast-room.

"There is something contagious in the cheerfulness of this sweet old house," exclaimed Margaret.

All the men present, except Sir Robert, rose as the young ladies entered. Everard and the doctor came forward to shake hands with them, and Margaret glancing at Brown, who stood still in his place, caught the flash of delight which gleamed in his eyes as they met hers. He did not attempt to approach or speak to her, only bowed low and then resumed his seat, nevertheless she thought, "How glad he seems to see me! I suppose he thinks I am a kind hostess."

"What sport, dear dad?" asked Valerie, whose place was by her father; she had shaken hands with Brown, who sat at his other side.

"Miserable! Birds scarce and shy. Hope we'll do better to-morrow. We are to try your moorland up by Langdon oak, Miss Neville, you must know this

young lady's possessions stretch over the border into Hillshire. Are you a pretty good shot, Brown?"

"I fear not, Sir Robert. I never had any chance of shooting in England, and very little in India."

"Won't you bring us our luncheon to-morrow?" asked Everard across the table addressing Valerie. "There's a capital place, where some big stones mark the boundary. There's a single oak tree, too, to shelter us. Won't you and Miss Neville come and Lady Stapylton?"

"And each carry our share of the food in a tin can tied up in a red handkerchief," cried Valerie laughing.

"Faith, you'd better not suggest such a notion of wifely duty to the poor lonely fellow, Miss Stapylton," said Dr. O'Grady, with an indescribable wink.

"Ay! I've seen poor souls trudging along in the blazing sunlight carrying his food to her man in the fields," observed the general, who was very tender towards women and children.

"Who will probably thrash her if it is not to his mind," put in Everard.

"That cannot be often the case," said Margaret, "and when it is, we who live on the labor of these people are accountable for it. Why do we not educate and train them to a higher standard."

"Easier said than done," exclaimed Everard, laughing. "I fancy when you come of age, Miss Neville, we'll see Caresford parceled out into allotments, and the Court turned into a huge co-operative store."

"No, no! I shall never have the courage of my opinions. Besides, my mind is so muddled between

my tastes and my reason that I shall never do anything good or decided."

"These mists of the dawn will clear away before the fuller light of noonday, my love," said Lady Stapylton, kindly.

Brown did not speak, but his listening, smiling eyes showed that he took in her words.

"Anyhow, you will come," persisted Everard, a big, rather clumsy young man, heavily made, with a broad, sunburnt face, and honest gray eyes that looked at all the world as straight as he rode. "There's quite a decent road most of the way, and when it gets too bad there's a very short walk."

"Yes, come and lunch with us, my lady," cried the host. "Though the only occasions where the sight of a woman isn't pleasant to the eyes, aye, and calculated 'to make one wise,' are in the hunting-field and with the guns."

"Well, after that, Sir Robert!" exclaimed Margaret, and stopped, as if to imply a note of admiration.

"There are no exceptions," said Brown quietly.

"By George, Brown, you must come from my side of the water," cried O'Grady; "I'm of your opinion, my boy. I'll tell you what it is, I've so strong a desire for the pleasure of their company that I'll stay and escort the jewels to the *rendezvous*. Eh! What do you say, my lady? Will you accept the care of your most obedient?"

"Certainly, my dear doctor. More, I shall hand over the guardianship of these young ladies to you, and eat my luncheon in the quiet and cool of my own dining-room!"

"Oh, mother, do not stay here all alone," cried Valerie; "you love the moorland, why keep indoors?"

"Next time I shall be pleased to be with you, Val, but to-day I must take care of my head."

"It's a deuced deal too useful a head to be played tricks with," said Sir Robert, with a nod and a smile at his wife.

"If no one will take any more tea," said Valerie rising, "let us have a game of tennis. The sun is off the courts by this time."

Everyone agreed, and the party were soon strolling through the thicket, for the courts were at a little distance from the house.

Then for the first time Hugh Brown had an opportunity of speaking to Margaret without seeming to seek it. They had fallen a little behind the others, when a thorny branch of the wild-rose caught her muslin skirt.

"Pray stop, you will tear your dress, Miss Neville," he cried, "allow me to disentangle it."

"Thank you very much," she returned, as he set her garment free. "They should use the pruning knife here."

"I hope you were not very tired after your ball," he ventured to begin. "You were too kind a hostess to spare yourself any fatigue."

"Oh! no, I enjoyed it so much I did not mind being a little tired. It was so very nice, wasn't it?"

"If I were to say how enchanting I found it, you would think me a mere inexperienced schoolboy," and he laughed frankly.

"But you know more about balls than I do, Mr.

Brown. I never was at a real large one before. You have seen so many in India, you said."

"They were not bad, but they were not at Caresford Court," significantly.

"I am very glad you enjoyed it. I consider your enjoyment a personal compliment."

"You well may," returned Brown, and then wished he had not said it. He stole a glance at the pleasant, bright face beside him. The eyes looked straight into the trees before her, but the sweet mouth smiled with a kindly expression.

Nevertheless he was angry with himself. He ought to keep better watch over his lips. How uncouth he was in speech. It was her innate delicate kindness that withheld the reproof his ruggedness deserved.

How elegantly, how gracefully Manvers would have uttered the same thought. Silence for him was indeed golden, and yet he had an extraordinary desire to pour out his heart to Margaret Neville, to tell her of the one grief of his life, of his ambitions, of his profound admiration for herself. There was a strange mixture of timidity and daring in his thoughts.

Anyhow, come what might, he was beside her—was dwelling under the same roof. He should see her day by day for perhaps a week; hear her voice, and occasionally speak to her. It was enough; after—what matter.

The game was well contested. Everard played with Margaret, Brown with Valerie, Doctor O'Grady was umpire, and shouted the score aloud in stentorian tones.

Hugh Brown had certainly had some little exper-

ience of society in India before his regiment had been ordered home, but for two years after he joined as a commissioned officer they had been on the edge of a disaffected country, in a district where no man liked to bring his family, and the last year of his service in India was spent in the plains and Bombay when all the world had gone away for change. A few formal dinners, a few Tiffins, was about all the hospitality he had received.

Now, for the first time, he was staying in the house, the home of a gentleman, one of the "upper ten," respecting whose manners and customs he had occasionally conjectured, building his theories on the "*Ménage Macnab*."

The household at the Lodge was all the more striking to him because of its unpretending modesty; refinement and simplicity were its keynotes, and he was ashamed of his intense enjoyment of the dainty room assigned to him, the lookout over the fields, the bookshelves, the writing-table, the ordinary little luxuries which to him seemed so wonderful and so delightful.

He dressed slowly and with care, and inspected himself in a long glass with more attention than he had ever bestowed on the reflection of his person before.

He was, however, singularly free from personal vanity, and thanked heaven that, at all events, he did not look worse than other men in evening dress.

Then came the pleasant dinner by the light of soft oil lamps. The windows open to the flower-scented evening air, while the rising moon replaced by her silvery radiance the fast fading daylight.

The repast was more foreign than English in charac-

ter, consisting of small dainty dishes, and abundant, peculiarly-prepared vegetables, winding up with fragrant coffee; the conversation bright and flowing easily.

The men did not linger long over their wine cups.

How charming the long, low drawing-room looked with its lamps and wax-lights, its comfortable chairs and sofas, books, and water-color drawings, its abundant flowers, its mixture of elegance and homeliness.

Lady Stapylton was standing beside a writing-table reading a note which had just come. Valerie was teaching a little Yorkshire terrier to sit up and beg, and Margaret was looking over some new music which lay on the piano.

Jack Everard immediately devoted himself to Val and her canine pupil. The doctor joined Miss Neville, and Brown stood with Sir Robert continuing a discussion of some military matters begun in the dining-room.

"Would any of you care for a game of billiards," asked Sir Robert suddenly.

No one seemed to care for the suggestion.

"I fancy you are all tired," said Lady Stapylton. "I shall sing you a Volkslied, if Val will play for me, but on one condition, there, you can all sit still and listen."

"Granted, whatever it is," cried every one.

"Very good! I shall name my condition after I have sung."

Valerie took out her violin and assured herself it was in perfect accord with the piano, then Lady

Stapylton, leaning against the end of the instrument, began to the accompaniment of her daughter.

It was a simple air full of pathetic sweetness and arranged as a duet between voice and violin. The voice and style of the songstress were perfect, and full of expression.

When she ended it was a moment or two before the listeners applauded, so spellbound were they. Then Everard exclaimed, "By Jove! that is something like singing! I wish the words were English. I always like to know what a song is about."

"Sure if the music don't tell you that, you have uncommon little in your soul, my dear fellow," exclaimed O'Grady.

"There are many lovers of music who yet like to hear the words of a song," said Lady Stapylton.

"Why do you not learn German, or why have you not learned it, Mr. Everard?" asked Val. "It is a most interesting language."

"Learn German? No, of course not. What use would German be to me?" he returned with an air of astonishment.

"I am sure you have plenty of time."

"There you mistake, Miss Stapylton. I have always lots to do."

"I hope you remember that you have all committed yourselves to grant my condition," said Lady Stapylton.

"Yes."

"Of course."

"Certainly."

"Then I shall select one victim. Mr. Brown, I am

very anxious to hear you sing, song for song. Give us one of the ditties the soldiers used to like."

"Sing? Me?" exclaimed Brown, starting from a sort of trance into which the lovely voice of the speaker had thrown him. "You would not consider my songs music, Lady Stapylton. They are very rough compositions, and the words great rubbish. No, I could not sing, and to a queen of song like you."

"Faith, he can give you a capital song if he likes, and thunder it out right well. Come along, Brown; you are not the man to say no to a lady," said O'Grady.

"I have quite set my heart on hearing you," persisted his hostess, "but if you prefer it, we will have a private audience to-morrow."

"No, no," cried Valerie and her friend together. "We want to hear Mr. Brown, too. Do sing, Mr. Brown."

Thus implored, Brown acceded, though he felt as if he would prefer the earth opening to swallow him up.

"I must obey your wishes, only pray remember you have brought the infliction on yourselves."

He rose as he spoke, and drew forward a chair for Lady Stapylton, retiring himself a little further into a part of the room that was rather in the shadow.

"See that, now," cried O'Grady. "The poor fellow is that shy, he's gone into the dark to hide his face."

"You are quite right, Doctor," said Hugh, good-humoredly. "I will give you the best of my camp ditties, which is no great thing."

Then he began an ordinary ballad enough.

"At daybreak we march on the foemen,
Who wait in their thousands above,
But ere the assembly is sounded,
Here's a health to the girl that I love."

The air was catching, and every verse had as a refrain, "The girl that I love."

But the rich, melodious voice which trolled forth the words would have given beauty to the commonest kind of music. As he sang he forgot his shyness, and threw himself into his song, giving the last verse with indescribable fire and tenderness.

"Oh! core of my heart, if I'm left on the field,
Thro' the red mist of battle thy sweet eyes will shine,
And when to the grim King of Terror I yield,
My last thought, as life fades, shall be thine, only thine,
Oh! girl that I love, that I love."

"Bravo!"

"Capital!"

"Would bring down any house!"

"Faith he was thinking of his own girl! No mistake about that," cried the irrepressible doctor.

"I wish he would sing it over again," this in a low tone from Margaret to Valerie.

"Ah, no! that would spoil it completely. But what a glorious voice! Isn't it, mother?"

Lady Stapylton was the only person who had made no comment. She sat quite still and silent. Her daughter's question seemed to rouse her; she rose suddenly, and, passing Brown, she said in an unsteady voice, "You have given me great pleasure," then she went through the open door of the conservatory and disappeared.

Hugh Brown looked after her, struck by her words and the slight agitation with which they were spoken, then, his heart beating a little faster than usual, he joined the rest, to whom the doctor was holding forth.

"Begad! I'll lay a couple of ponies the writer of that song was an Irishman."

"I don't know who wrote it. I heard a sergeant of the 12th Lancers sing it soon after I came out to India, and picked it up by ear. How do you know, or guess, it was written by an Irishman?"

"Because the fellow that sings it calls his girl 'core of my heart.' Now no Englishman has imagination enough to invent such an expression, but there isn't a Paddy, ay, even a reaper with a black pipe stuck in his caubeen that wouldn't use the term to his sweetheart or his child or his mother."

"Does he never apply it to his wife, Doctor O'Grady?" asked Val, with a sly smile.

"Oh! I forgot that! You see we unlucky soldiers haven't so much to do with matrimony."

"But you are not exactly a soldier, are you?" said Everard.

"By George! he has been often enough under fire to be entitled to the honors of war," cried the general.

"Yes, Doctor. I remember you at K——, patching up that poor fellow Macdermot, under a hail of bullets, so as to get him off the field."

"Oh, never mind. We are just unornamental sawbones, without much honor or glory, whatever we do."

"Come, now, you know you fellows are mentioned

in despatches, and decorated with Lord knows what," said the general.

"Well, Mr. Brown, I did enjoy that song of yours," exclaimed Everard. "I heard every word of it, and understood it, which is a grand matter. They are going to get up a corobery of some kind in Castle-town, to repair the tower of St. Margaret's, a very old church. They will be sure to ask Lady Stapylton to help; she is our mainstay. You must help us, too."

"Why, where is mother?" asked Val suddenly.

"She left the room just now," said Hugh.

"I hope she has no return of that horrid neuralgia. I will go and see," exclaimed Val.

"What a splendid night," observed Hugh to Margaret, with whom he had hardly had a word. She rose and went to the window, through which she soon stepped on to the grass beyond. He hesitated a moment, and then followed her. A glorious moon was rising behind the tall trees, and casting long shadows on the lawn, and gradually silvering the open pasture. Margaret leant on the high back of a rustic seat for a minute in silence.

"Your song interested me so much," she said, as if half to herself. "I think it is because I know you have seen hard fighting that gave a sort of reality to the words. How horrible a battle must be!"

"Inexpressibly horrible. No man who has not been under fire can desire peace so ardently as one who has seen service. It is only the strong animal excitement, the tiger that is in us all, that carries one through the scenes of a war."

"If you think this, why do you stay in the army?"

"Because, to preserve peace for the mass, some must fight hard, and then there is much besides the fighting side of soldiering that appeals to me. Do you not sing yourself, Miss Neville?"

"No, I have scarcely any voice. I can play a little but I love to listen to singing. You must sing to me again, Mr. Brown."

"Whenever and wherever you like."

"You must sing in the large drawing-room at Caresford, this one is not large enough for you. Tell me, was Rupert Manvers in your regiment when you saved his life?"

"No, he was on the general's staff, and belonged, I think, to the Guards. He exchanged into the Borderers since I joined the regiment."

A pause, then Hugh resumed: "You were right in saying that the surroundings of the Court were even more charming than the interior. That avenue of limes is a dream of beauty."

"Yes, I love it! I was at home the day you called, why did you not come in?"

"I was not sure if I ought to ask for you. You see, Miss Neville, I am not up to the etiquette of society, I am but a rough soldier," he said frankly.

"A gallant soldier, not a rough one," returned Margaret, with what seemed to Brown an enchanting smile. Before he could reply Valerie came through the window and joined them.

"The general wants us to play billiards, will you come? I am sorry to say that my mother is suffering dreadfully from that cruel neuralgia; she cannot come downstairs again."

CHAPTER XI.

NEXT morning was somewhat overcast, but the party assembled at breakfast in excellent spirits.

Everard observed "they would enjoy their sport all the more, as the weather was cooler."

"Put up your prayers, anyhow, that it may not rain," called out O'Grady, who was carving a ham at the sideboard, "for you can't expect the ladies to brave the elements for your sakes."

"No, of course not ; but, whether you come or stay, be sure you send the luncheon," said the host.

"Ah, Margaret, we are quite a secondary consideration," exclaimed Valerie.

"No, by no means ; still, luncheon is a most essential thing, and though your presence is a pleasant luxury, food is an absolute necessity, eh, Brown ?"

"Ultimately, Sir Robert ; but nine or ten hours' fast does a fellow no great harm after a breakfast like this."

"I have a note here from Manvers," resumed the general addressing his wife. "He cannot join us to-day. His brother Uppingham has had some attack, and has telegraphed for him again," and the conversation turned on Manvers' probable succession to the family title and estates.

Brown, who sat next his hostess, remarked that she looked pale and unrefreshed by sleep. There was a

certain watchfulness in her eyes, too, as if she were "on guard."

He was much attracted to Lady Stapylton, who was remarkably sympathetic and a delightful listener. She seemed to him a much greater lady than the Viscountess Hazelhurst, of Caresford Court, yet he felt he could speak to her without reserve.

"I hope you are not suffering this morning," he said, earnestly, under cover of the general talk. "We were grieved to find you were unable to come downstairs again last night."

"Thank you, I am much better. I often have these neuralgic attacks since I was in India. The heat there did not suit me at all. Still, the air here is so bracing, I hope to get rid of it in time."

"I have only been in the Northwest Provinces, except for a few months, and have been nearly as well there as in England," said Brown.

"You are fortunate. That accounts for your readiness to return. But, Mr. Brown, I have not thanked you for your song. Yes, I know the music was no great thing, though quite of the popular order, but you have a glorious voice. It is not an English voice. It is too bad to think of its being lost in the army."

"I am delighted you approve of it. But why do you regret that it is lost in the army?"

"My dear sir, with such a voice you could coin money, and you are content with a subaltern's pay!"

"But I greatly prefer a soldier's life. I should not like to make my living by amusing people!"

"Take care, Mr. Brown. Remember that was the way I made mine," and she looked into his eyes with

a sad, questioning expression he had often noticed in hers, but smiling as if in no way offended.

"That is quite different," he exclaimed, flushing with the fear of being rude. "One can always imagine a woman, I mean a lady singer, an angel gifted by heaven with a power :

'To touch the souls of men,
And lead them back to heaven again.' "

"Well parried, Mr. Brown. But why should not men do equal good?"

"No, I cannot fancy that. Men may be strong and just, but as to angelic gifts——" he laughed and shook his head.

"Well, gentlemen, the break will be ready at ten, for the first few miles of dusty road. I have a letter or two to write, but I'll not keep you waiting; an old soldier is nothing if he is not punctual," said Sir Robert in audible tones as he rose from the table. The rest followed his example, and Lady Stapylton said to her neighbor:—

"I am going to gather a few late roses before the sun is on the front of the house, will you come with me?"

"I shall be delighted," said Brown, with a look of genuine pleasure.

Passing through the hall Lady Stapylton put on a large, shady hat and took a basket from a table where various appliances for flower-cutting and gardening stood, and they went into the grounds, Brown assisting his hostess to the best of his ability.

"Yes, Mr. Brown," she resumed, "your voice might be a mine of wealth to you. It is a true baritone, and

I rather think you have been taught how to sing. No ignorant, totally ignorant person could manage his voice as you do."

"When I was quite a boy I used to sing in a choir. Of course that lasted but a short time."

"Still it gave you ideas you could not have otherwise had. Where did you sing? In town or country?"

"At a church in London."

"That was best; you get better instructions, of course, in a chapel. Church of England, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes; though I often went to Catholic churches, the Oratory, and a Carmelite Church at Kensington, where they sang divinely."

"The music is a joy to you? Can you reach that deep red rose high up there? Did you live at Kensington?"

"No. I lived till I was nearly eighteen in a suburb called St. John's Wood. You could not know it."

"No; yes. Oh, thank you"—he picked up the rose she had dropped. "When we lived for a short time in London, I used to go there to see a cousin of Sir Robert's. Did you ever sing 'Il Balen del suo sorriso?'"

Brown laughed, and shook his head. "I am afraid my comrades would have hissed me if I had. But I have heard the air. Sometimes I used to manage a visit to the gallery at Covent Garden, which was a sort of Paradise to me. I have never felt anything like it since till—till I heard you sing last night."

"Thank you. It does me good to hear you say so. We artists are greedy of praise. Try the song to-night. I will play the accompaniment for you."

"But, Lady Stapylton, I could not say the words; I do not know Italian."

"Oh, I will teach you, teach you in a couple of hours," she cried eagerly. "Your voice will suit the song exactly. I long to hear it sung by you; you would give me so much pleasure!"

"Then of course I shall." There was a pause, during which the sounds of music came from the house.

"They are studying their duets," said Lady Stapylton, with a smile which struck Brown as strangely sad considering it accompanied such an ordinary remark.

"Val is very fond of music, but I always regret she has no voice. I had a dear little son once; he would have been two years older than Valerie had he lived; I wonder if he would have sung? Did your mother sing, Mr. Brown?" she added abruptly, pressing her hand against her side.

"I do not know; I do not remember her."

"Ah! forgive me! it must be indeed cruel to have no mother in one's infancy."

"I was very kindly treated," returned Brown gravely.

"Were you? Then you did not miss her?"

"You cannot miss what you have never known."

"That is true. Well, Mr. Brown, you must let me give you a few lessons, and do tell me all about yourself. Oh! you might have a magnificent life, if you would listen. But there, I hear wheels, I must let you go. Do not think me tiresome, but—but, you remind me of a dear brother I lost, only I must not keep you. It is '*temps militaire*.'"

The shooting party had hardly been gone an hour, which had passed almost unheeded by the two girls,

who were absorbed in their practise, when Val, in a pause of the music, exclaimed:

"Why, it is raining fast."

"Yes, it is indeed!"

"It is very provoking," continued Valerie. "I quite looked forward to our expedition this afternoon."

"I do not think the rain will last," said Margaret, stepping to the open window. "See, the clouds are lightening over there, in the wind's eye."

"At all events, even if she had made up her mind to go, it would not be fit for mother; she ought to avoid damp most carefully."

"I am afraid she was very ill last night when you went after her, and she looked so worn this morning."

"Yes, she was pretty bad," returned Val thoughtfully, and stood still a moment. Then she took her violin, screwed up some of the strings, and tried it critically.

She was, in fact, more uneasy about her mother than she cared to say.

On tapping at her door the previous evening Lady Stapylton had taken no notice, and listening intently Val thought she heard the sound of sobs. "What could be the matter? The fiends of doubt, or dread, or concealment were unknown in Eden Lodge. What could ail her mother?"

"It is I, Valerie. Won't you let me in?"

"Not now, dear. You can do me no good."

"Is the pain very bad?"

"Yes, awfully bad!" in a tone of suffering.

"I might bathe your brow with——"

"No, nothing of that kind will do me any good. It

will pass in time. I can bear it best alone. I cannot have any one near me. Go, love, and say I cannot return to the drawing-room."

So Valerie reluctantly left her.

This desire of her mother's to suffer alone made a deep impression on her. Not even to want father seemed remarkable. She turned back the leaves in the book of her remembrance and recalled nothing similar.

"Yet this place seemed to do her good. She has been unusually well here," she said half to herself.

"It would be very nice if you could come and stay with me," cried Margaret. "Any little change does good sometimes, and while Aunt Harriet is away it would be——"

"Impossible!" put in Val. "She is really the lady of the house and she does not like mother."

"Why do you think so, Val?"

"Because I do! There is a logical answer!"

"Then I am sure Lady Stapylton does not like my aunt!"

"You are right there, Margaret."

"Aunt Harriet is not fascinating."

"We had better leave her alone, and get on with our duets. That second movement in D minor is very difficult."

Margaret went back to the piano, but instead of beginning to play sat still for a moment, and then exclaimed:

"I cannot believe that he was not born a gentleman!"

"Who?" asked Val, lowering her bow.

"Oh, Mr. Brown. His manners are not quite conventional."

"But he is perfectly well-bred. There is a sort of dignified modesty about him, ready to speak when spoken to, but absolutely unobtrusive, though quite sure of himself. And how handsome he is! Those dark blue eyes of his, with their long black lashes, are very rare. Mother says she never saw any eyes like them, save once."

"And whose were they?" asked Margaret, feeling the color rise in her cheek at this openly expressed admiration in a way that surprised and vexed her. She fully agreed with her friend's opinion of Hugh Brown's looks, but she would not have said so; why, she could not tell.

"Whose eyes? Oh, I do not know—some one she met abroad. Come, Marge, we are losing time," and they recommenced their practise of the difficult passage.

The shower passed, and the sun shone out for an hour or two, but the afternoon remained softly gray, and fragrant, as the peculiar autumnal atmosphere drew out the soul of grass and flowers and leaves.

The doctor and his fair companions started in good time. Valerie was charioteer, driving a pair of strong, saucy, petted ponies. O'Grady sat behind with the groom and a large luncheon basket, and managed to do a considerable amount of talking, leaning on the back of the front seat.

He asked endless questions about the gentlemen's seats they passed, and one or two villages through which they drove. He inquired minutely into the history of the various county families, whose names

were mentioned and wondered the young ladies did not know more about them.

"Why, now, there isn't a boy nor a slip of a girl in the county Kerry that couldn't tell you the ins and outs of the O'Grady, of Ballybrook, from the time of Brian Boroo down, and a mighty quare story it is."

"How long did Brian Boroo reign?" asked Margaret Neville, who was inclined to take things seriously.

"How long is it? Why, now, isn't it a shame to think of the mints of money that have been paid for the education of an elegant young heiress like yourself, and you to be left ignorant of the principal facts of history."

"Come, my dear doctor," cried Valerie, laughing. "You can't call the reign of Brian Boroo one of the principal facts of history. He must have been a rather savage potentate."

"Savage! Begad, he was nothing of the sort. Didn't Malachi wear a collar of gold, and who made it? High art Irish workmen; faith, no others."

"I thought Moore said 'He won it from the proud invader.'"

"Well, if he did, some wandering Irish gold-worker taught the invaders to make it. Look here! Sure every one that ever read history knows that the Irish had schools and music and poetry, and art and sciences and the rest of it, when all Europe was a howling wilderness! 'The harp that once thro' Tara's Halls,' eh! That proves they had musical competitions, though they were a deuced deal too cute to have military exams, unless indeed for the prize in swordsmanship and horsemanship and all that. They knew

better than to blind their soldiers with hard study, to bend their backs over the desk, and relax their limbs and muscles, sitting cramming in a close room, or to take the sharp edge off their perception and decision by teaching them to look at every side of a question! There's young Brown. What exam would have taught him to see with half an eye the one chance for saving our little force, and dare to do it too without hesitation. Gad! men feel when their leader can lead. If you had seen that fine young fellow start up the hill-side, daring and cautious both, and the men after him just as eager as he was, faith they'd have followed him to Hell, and, I beg your pardon, God forgive me for a blundering idiot to name such a place to you."

"Oh! never mind, Doctor O'Grady. My father says that genius can do without training, but training makes mediocrity useful," said Val.

"Sir Robert is a rock of sense," returned the doctor gravely. He had almost talked himself out of breath. "But," with a sort of groan, "we are getting into the wilds, the jolting is enough to shake the life out of you. How much further can we go, my man?" to the groom.

"Not more than half a mile, sir. See, sir, there are some of the gentlemen on the lookout for us," and he pointed to a figure standing on a mass of gray stone partly imbedded in grass and heather at the other side of which rose a wide-spreading gnarled oak tree, which had encountered for more than a century "all the airts that wind can blow."

"We had better stop now. Here is one of the keepers coming to help with the basket," said Valerie.

"The ponies seem very hot," added Margaret.

"Will you take them out, Vincent?"

"I'm sure I don't know, miss. It would be awkward if we could not catch them again."

"Oh! they always come at my call," said his young mistress, "and they will enjoy themselves up here, won't you, my beauties?" She went to pat and to speak to them, while Margaret moved forward to greet Brown, who came towards her. Again the same light of joy she had seen the day before flashed over his face as his eyes met hers, and gave her a strange sensation, half fear, half pleasure. She must not be familiar with this soldier of fortune however admirable he might be, because, oh because he was so different from herself; but she hastened to say, "Are we in good time?"

"Yes, excellent! quite punctual! Sir Robert and Mr. Everard have gone in another direction, but no doubt the unerring instinct of hunger will turn their steps this way soon. Has the doctor been a careful escort?"

"Oh, we took care of him. He is very amusing and agreeable."

"He talks a good deal, and has a curious upside-down way of looking at things, but he is a real good fellow, whatever his errors of logic may be, he never makes mistakes in medical matters. He saved my life at Lhakdara."

"Were you badly wounded, Mr. Brown?"

"Not at all; but the wounds were neglected, and I got fever, and was rather bad for a bit."

"Oh, Mr. Brown, where is my father?" cried Val, leaving her ponies.

"I don't know, exactly, but not far off. Can I help you?"

"Oh, yes, thank you ; just undo the traces and knot them up, while Vincent helps the keeper to carry the luncheon-basket."

By the time Sir Robert and his guest joined them the basket was unpacked, the cloth laid on a folding table, and the doctor seated on a stone, his hat lying on the heather, and with his cuffs turned back was diligently mixing the salad.

The talk turned on the number of birds bagged. Everard had scored highest, and Brown, the general declared, had done much better than he expected, considering the report he had given of himself.

During luncheon, Sir Robert pointed out a part of the moor which had been the scene of various skirmishes between the Cavaliers and Roundheads in by-gone days, and this led to an animated discussion as to the best mode of defending a certain narrow gully, or head of a little valley, near them. In this Brown was quite at home, and though his deference to his host never failed, he held stoutly to his own opinion. He spoke well and fluently, and both girls listened with deep interest.

Luncheon lasted longer than they thought, and Sir Robert, suddenly looking at his watch, started up and exclaimed, "By George, it is three o'clock. I want to try the Miller's Hollow on the homeward way. Won't you try a shot, O'Grady?"

"If you all keep well out of the way, I'll try my luck, but my gun has a discursive way with it."

"Take mine, Doctor," urged Brown; "it's a respectable straight-shooting weapon."

"And what will you do yourself?"

"I dare say the men have a spare gun with them."

"Do not trouble about me, General. Miss Stapylton wants to walk as far as a place where they found some Roman coins and ornaments buried. Miss Neville says she will be our guide, and I propose to escort them."

"Ah, my boy, if you begin a stroll with two young ladies by a proposal, the Lord knows where you'll stop."

Brown blushed furiously and looked annoyed; the two girls laughed good-humoredly.

"There's safety in numbers, Doctor O'Grady," said Val.

"Faith, that's true."

"Who do you go with, Everard?" asked Sir Robert.

Everard looked from one to the other undecidedly. "I should like—G," he was beginning when Valerie cut him short.

"The birds, of course; Mr. Everard has too noble a mind to care for the trivialities of feminine chatter."

"Thank you, Miss Stapylton, you show me the way I should go," and he turned abruptly from her.

"Come along, then, we have lost too much time; we can walk round to the point you are making for and join you at the Shepherd's hut. Vincent can bring the ponies pretty near and pick up the doctor; good-by for the present," and the stout veteran tramped off over the heather, followed by the doctor and Everard.

Val and her friend set out in a different direction at the same time.

Brown kept by Margaret's side, and for a few minutes they did not speak.

"How delightful the air is upon these moors," exclaimed Val, who was the greatest talker of the three. "It is like drinking champagne or imbibing some spiritual ether; now there is a charming view. We are pretty high up, and the woods and fields lie spread out so richly below there, to the west. We are in Hillshire here, it is much wilder and more rocky than Blankfordshire, but I like my own country best. You know my father is a Blankfordite, his people belonged to this county, but to the other side beyond Castletown."

"To me it is the most beautiful country I have ever seen," said Hugh, looking round with eyes which beheld an enchanted land. "I know little or nothing of English scenery; my experience of Nature is in her grandest and most overwhelming moods; the spurs of the Himalayas are big enough to dwarf everything except their bigger brothers, and I have never seen any of the greater mountains."

"They must be wonderful," Valerie was beginning, when Margaret, speaking suddenly as if out of a dream, asked, "Why were you so unkind to Jack Everard? He is so good-natured and honest—I like him."

"He is very much improved latterly," returned Val gravely. "When we came down here first, nearly two years ago, he was insufferable. You see, Mr. Brown, he is the biggest, eldest son in the county; his mother worships him, and every one else's mother makes a kind of god of him, so he grew frightfully conceited, in a

shy, awkward way. He affected not to like women—he really did avoid them—and generally made himself ridiculous. He is a good fellow, but was on the brink of ruin when I took him in hand. A severe course of snubbing has almost restored him to his senses, but I shall not relax my discipline yet."

"I do not think it can do any one good to be unkindly treated, Val. You would not like any girl to speak to you as Val did, Mr. Brown?"

"No, I should have been utterly confounded. I should never have spoken to her again."

"Are you so easily offended," asked Val, coloring.

"No, by no means; I should think I had done something ill-bred or uncouth, and not knowing where I was wrong, or how to clear myself, I should submit in silence to my evil destiny; but Mr. Everard knows his ground better, though women—ladies—are, I believe, difficult to understand."

"You believe? Don't you know?" said Val laughing.

"I do not; I have had little or no chance."

"You have a splendid opportunity now, Mr. Brown. You have four, or rather three, specimens, for as yet Margaret and myself are merely a brace of butterflies; you can class us together: but there is Lady Hazelhurst, who may represent the world and the flesh."

"But not the Devil," put in Margaret in her soft tones. "She would be more interesting if she did."

"And, then, my dear mother, who may be taken as a development of humanity," continued Val.

"An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace," ventured Brown.

"Oh, that is charming," cried Val, clapping her hands. "Finally Margaret and myself, the half-developed creature in the stage of growth, the butterfly stage."

"The butterfly symbolizes the soul, does it not?" asked Brown, greatly amused, but a little bewildered by the frank, outspoken talk of his companions.

"It is scarcely a worthy symbol," said Margaret. "Please turn to the right here; we must climb over these rocks to save a long *détour*. I used to ramble about over this place when I was a little girl—when I first came to live here with my aunt. My nursery governess had been the bailiff's daughter, and knew the moors like a moor-hen. Take care, Margaret! You do not climb as well as I do."

They scrambled up with very little help from their cavalier, and at the other side found a steep descent to a clump of stern-looking Scotch firs.

Among these was a great gray stone, partially covered with moss. Underneath it was a deep hollow, for the stone lay cornerways on another, and sheltered without pressing on the ground beneath.

It was here they found a bronze casket containing silver and gold, some rings and bracelets. Part of the old Roman Road to London came near this, and it is supposed that these things were the spoil of a robber, who hid them, and was then murdered before he could return to take his treasure.

Hugh was greatly interested. He asked many questions, and climbed upon the rocks again to gather some idea respecting the bearings of the Roman road which Margaret pointed out according to traditions on the

subject. They sat on the grass and mossy stones, and talked of the mighty men of old who had penetrated into these, to them, remote regions, and laughed and chatted lightly till Val reminded them they were to meet Sir Robert and pick up the doctor. So the pleasant hours sped on, Hugh feeling he had made another step forward on the new and sunny road which was opening itself to his daring tread.

CHAPTER XII.

THE next day Sir Robert Stapylton was obliged to go to a small town at some distance to keep an appointment with his agent. His wife, therefore, claimed the gentlemen for the off-day, and proposed an expedition to the ruins of a Cistercian Abbey, some ten or twelve miles distant, which was the favorite picnic point in the county.

"The young people can ride," she continued, "and I will go soberly in my little pony carriage."

"Perhaps you would like another day on the moors better," said Sir Robert to his male guests generally.

"Not at all."

"By no means."

"We are not such heathen," was their choral reply.

"Then I'll send over for Miss Neville's horse. I'm afraid, Brown, it is rather far to fetch yours at this hour, and——"

"And," interrupted Brown, smiling, "I have none to fetch." Sir Robert felt a little vexed at his own thoughtlessness.

"I am sure mine is very much at your service. He is a good weight-carrier, but rather a heavy animal for a gay young horseman."

"Take mine," cried Everard heartily, "and if Lady Stapylton will allow me the pleasure, I will drive the

ponies for her. The general's Rufus is the very thing for Doctor O'Grady."

"Do you think I've done enough good, or bad, in this wicked world, that you want to send me out of it?" asked the doctor, helping himself to some greengages (they were at breakfast).

"Why, I thought you were a first-rate cross-country man. Imagine an O'Grady afraid of a horse."

"Is it afraid? No, not I! But the baste generally objects to me so strongly, and makes such powerful efforts to get rid of me, that—well, he sometimes succeeds."

"Oh, Rufus is a steady, well-disciplined animal," said the general laughing. "Though he is a bright chestnut, I think he will carry you quietly."

"Well, then, if Miss Valerie will promise to look after me, I'll make my will as soon as I've swallowed my breakfast, then I'll mount and ride by the lovely lady's side. You see how the very notion wakes up the native poetry of my heart!"

"You are a modern Troubadour, Doctor. Yes, I will take charge of you with pleasure."

"See that now. I'd like to know which of ye could bespeak a guardian angel at a moment's notice. Brown—Everard, there lies my gage," and he placed a large greengage on the table opposite Everard, who calmly proceeded to eat it.

"There! There's low-mindedness for you! To such vile uses does he put my chivairous symbol of defiance. Another cup, my dear lady" (to the hostess); "nothing short of the best Bohea can wash down that insult."

Here Margaret, who was often late, made her appearance.

"I am so ashamed and sorry, dear Lady Stapylton," she exclaimed, blushing in the earnestness of her apology. "No, don't stir; don't mind me," to Everard and Brown, who rose on her entrance and proceeded to attend to her wants.

"I do not think you have done anything worthy of death or of bonds, Margaret. I think your unpunctuality is an unconscious fault."

"I always intend to be so early to-morrow," returned Margaret; "unfortunately I am wakeful at the wrong end of the night. I lay with my eyes open a long, long time, imagining what the country was like when that treasure was buried; and then I dreamed of Roman knights and shepherds—a curious jumble. Dreams are fatiguing."

"It is a kind of fatigue I have rarely known," said Brown, to whom she had addressed herself.

"Yet I like to dream," she added; "sometimes dreams seem so real."

"Come along and have a look at the horses," cried Sir Robert. "They propose riding to Beaumont Abbey this afternoon, my dear," said he to Margaret. "I'll send over to Caresford for your horse, if you'll write a line. We have no second lady's horse just now, I am sorry to say."

"Thank you, Sir Robert; you know I prefer my own to any other steed."

"Remember, Mr. Brown, I expect you to be my pupil this morning," said Lady Stapylton as the men left the room. "Come to me as soon as Sir Robert has started."

"If you will be so very good. Yes, certainly."

"Now, Margaret, you must have some more toast and a little fruit. You are starving yourself because you were late."

"Indeed, I am not. I want to write a line to old Nevins, my own special groom. He knows all I want."

"Just fancy, Mr. Brown has no horse," exclaimed Val. "I suppose he knows how to ride, though."

"Of course he does," said Lady Stapylton. "He was some six or seven years in a cavalry regiment."

"To be sure. He must be a very sensible man to resist keeping a horse if he cannot afford it," exclaimed Valerie.

"Does it cost a great deal to keep a horse?" asked Margaret.

"I do not know, but I fancy it must," said Valerie, who was eminently practical. "Just think of all the hay and oats a horse eats, the cleaning and care he needs, which some one must be paid to do, and the clothes he wears."

"You think of everything, Val," said her friend admiringly. "It seems to me that everything just grows. I only occasionally realize that everything is the result of labor."

It was nearly eleven before Sir Robert drove off to the station, and Lady Stapylton was free to meet Brown at the piano.

He did not appear at once, and his hostess played the air of "Il Balen" very audibly to give him notice that she was ready.

He came quickly. "I had gone with Miss Stapyl-

ton and Miss Neville to the poultry yard," he said; "but I was already returning when I heard the piano."

"And the girls?" asked Lady Stapylton.

"I left them inspecting a new brood of chickens."

"Now, Mr. Brown, you shall learn the words and their meaning." She took up the music, and making room for him on the sofa beside her, proceeded to give him a lesson in the meaning and pronunciation of the Italian words.

Brown was a diligent and intelligent pupil, and was soon sufficiently at home to attempt the song, Lady Stapylton writing the English equivalents under many words.

"You have a fortune in your throat," said his accomplished instructress, looking up to him with a brilliant smile. "Why will you not put out your hand to take it?"

"If the fortune did not bring content to me, what care I how large it be," cried Hugh, laughing. "I am very pleased that my voice gives you pleasure, but acting is an impossibility to me. I cannot make believe, though I enjoy the acting of others."

"Then you prefer a soldier's life to anything else?"

"I do infinitely. Pray remember that fighting is only one of its various sides; a general ought to have many statesmanlike qualities."

"And you intend to be a general?" asked his hostess.

"You smile at my preposterous ambition?"

"No, I sympathize with it most warmly; none more warmly," she returned in a low, soft tone that sent a thrill of gratification through his heart.

"And why should you not? Junot was a gunner

at the siege of Toulon. But you must not vegetate in sleepy little English garrisons."

"I am well aware of it; but I must bide my time. Sir Robert is so good as to promise me his help."

"Yes, I am sure he is anxious to push your fortunes, and I will keep his memory alive. Yes, you ought—you must go back to India. I shall be sorry not to see you again, but it would be so much, much better for you, to turn your back on England. Fortune waits you in the far East, with its barbaric pearl and gold, its rude magnificence."

She spoke eagerly, excitedly.

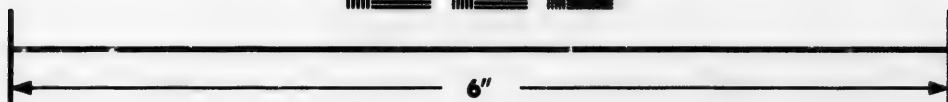
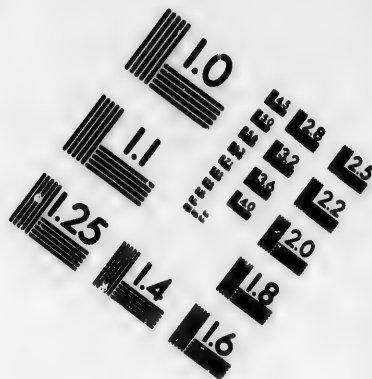
Brown felt profound surprise at the personal interest she seemed to take in his fortunes.

"You are, indeed, kind to care what becomes of me," he said; "and being isolated, cut off from kith and kin as I am, makes your goodness doubly valuable."

"You will make all these ties for yourself," said Lady Stapylton. "Nature has been very good to you." She paused abruptly, and looked down on her own hands as they occasionally touched the keys of the piano. "Yes, I will urge Sir Robert to let no chance for you escape him. Come, Mr. Brown, try this verse once more. I want to display my pupil this evening." And for some time they repeated various passages with great care and interest.

Then again they lapsed into conversation, Lady Stapylton holding Hugh's eyes with her own by some potent influence which stirred his heart to tenderness, pity, wonder, at the curious understanding that seemed to have sprung up between them. Speaking of some





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famous singer whom he had heard when a boy, Hugh exclaimed, "Some of his notes were so sweet and strong they woke one's spirit like the trump of an angel." He threw up his right hand as he spoke, the open palm turned outward with a rather peculiar gesture.

Lady Stapylton started and looked at him with a pained, startled glance.

"Tell me," she said, "are you all English? Is there no foreign blood in your veins?"

The color rose slowly in Brown's cheek and then faded. "I cannot answer," he said. "I have no idea whatever whence I came. It is a strange position, is it not, to be absolutely alone in the world."

He laughed a slight, shy laugh. "Don't think me a mere sentimentalist if I confess that I have always longed for a mother. But it must be pleasant to have kith and kin about one."

"Ah, yes; if—if ——" she stopped suddenly, and then to his dismay, burst into a fit of weeping. It was very brief; she covered her face in her handkerchief, while dry sobs shook her frame.

Hugh Brown did not know what to say or do.

"Can I get you water—anything?" he exclaimed.

"No, no; nothing. I have lost all control of myself; it is terrible." She rose, snatched up a large fan, and walking to and fro fanned herself eagerly.

"You will think me mad," she exclaimed at length, speaking in gasps, as if struggling for breath. "But the sight of you, the sound of your voice, are more than I can bear. I will explain a little—stay. I am more composed." She passed her handkerchief across

her brow, then pressing her hands tightly together she went on brokenly: "Mine was a lonely youth, too; but I had one dear brother who was all the world to me; we shared everything; we were poor as to gold and silver, but rich, oh, how rich—in our youth, our hopes, our ambitions. I lost him when he was in the full vigor of his intellect, in the dawn of his success, after much trial and disappointment, and you are so like him, so very like. I could have screamed with surprise, with the mingling of pain and pleasure, when first I saw you at the Caresford Ball. No, you cannot dream what you recall to me."

"If I only reminded you of happiness I should be glad," said Hugh, hesitatingly; "but I fear the sight of me is more painful than pleasurable."

"No, it is not quite that. I would do anything to help or serve you; but, you will understand my emotion a little now, and forgive me for distressing you, for I see you feel for me; and, Mr. Brown, this strange outburst of mine will be a profound secret between us, will it not?"

"Can it be necessary to assure you of that, Lady Stapylton?"

"No, no; certainly not. I am sure I can trust you. Oh! yes, I will trust you. Above all, Sir Robert must know nothing of my weakness. He is so good, so true, so anxious about my health, my happiness. He must never know! my brother was dead before I married. I wonder he does not notice that you are like me too. The difference of age and sex prevents the likeness being strong, but it is there, no one has noticed it except Margaret Neville; she is very observant."

She stopped, and sighed deeply.

"I dare not flatter myself that I resemble you," said Brown.

"You will not mention it, you will not draw any attention to it?"

"Never! Nay, more, Lady Stapylton, I will forget all that has passed this morning. I will not allow it to cross my mind, it shall be a dream only of the night; I shall only keep a sense of gratitude for the trust you have placed in me."

"I believe you, I think I am safe with you. Yes, try to forget me, put me out of your mind. Soon you will return to India, and, I feel you have a brilliant career before you; may God prosper and protect you." She rose. "I must compose myself before I meet the rest." She stretched out her hand to him, he ventured to kiss it respectfully, and then she went quickly away.

Hugh Brown stood for a few instants quite still as she had left him, gazing after her, trying to divine the word of the puzzle which she presented to him. He had just collected his thoughts, and was about to leave the room, when Val came singing across the garden, and entered.

"What have you done with mother, Mr. Brown?" she exclaimed looking round.

"Lady Stapylton has this moment left the room. I fear she is tired; we have had a grand practise. She is an admirable teacher."

"No return of her neuralgia, I hope?"

"No, I think not."

"Have you mastered 'Il Balen' yet?"

"Not quite."

"We shall hear it this evening, I hope. I am going to ask mother to put off luncheon a little later. Doctor O'Grady has gone to the kitchen to show cook how to make Shikari Rhabobs, and they cannot be ready until 1.30. I believe the doctor is a great cook."

"Yes, he is a past-master."

"Oh, Mr. Brown, would you go and tell Margaret that they have brought her mare, and the groom says she is very fresh. I think he wants to see her; she is reading in the thicket, near the Druid's Altar," and Val left him to look for her mother.

Brown went most willingly to find Margaret. He was beginning to grudge every moment spent away from her as hopelessly lost, and how swiftly the enchanted hours were flying past. In two days more his visit, already prolonged at the general's request, would be at an end, and he must leave his paradise, perhaps never again to enter the golden gates. One of the joys of existence at Eden Lodge was that he was so delightfully at home there. He felt himself a favored guest. Moreover, both Val and Margaret treated him with a degree of confidence, almost familiarity, that to a weaker, less self-controlled man would have been intoxicating.

"How shall I bear life in the barracks, with no hope of another spell of fairyland," he asked himself, as he followed the path which led to the Druid's Altar. "Well, I'll try to enjoy every instant of those delicious days; at least I shall have the memory to perfume my heart for ever, and, cost what it may, nothing is too much to pay for such a glimpse of heaven."

He paused, for an opening in the trees enabled him to see Margaret, though unseen by her. She was sitting on a mossy stone, in a dark blue and white dress, most simple and cool-looking, her hat lay on the grass beside her, a book was open on her knee, and upon it her clasped hands rested. She seemed in deep thought, her soft brown eyes gazing far away.

Hugh could have looked long, but he feared being caught in this indulgence, so he moved forward, brushing the trees as he went past them, to warn her of his approach.

She looked up and smiled as he came near, but did not speak.

"Miss Stapylton desires me to say that your groom has brought your horse, and would like to see you."

"Let us go round to the stables then; my 'Lady-bird' is such a delightful creature, she knows me quite well. Are you fond of horses?"

"Yes, very; they are most sympathetic companions."

There was a pause. Margaret picked up her hat, put it on, and rose to her feet.

"Let me carry your book," said Brown. "Do you know, I was half afraid to disturb you as I came up, you seemed in such deep thought."

"Yes, I was. Shall I tell you what I was thinking of?"

"If you will honor me so far," he exclaimed.

The bright, brown eyes flashed a smile into his.

"I was not trying to solve any scientific or philosophic problem, Mr. Brown; I was reflecting on the

delightful fact that Mrs. Everard has sent us, that is everyone, invitations to a ball in September, I forget the date, and trying to make up my mind what I should wear. I shall be so glad to dance again. I enjoyed my own dance so much."

"Oh! that was a night I shall never forget," exclaimed Hugh Brown, more to himself than to his companion. "It opened a new world to me."

"But you had been to many dances before?"

"I never knew all the intoxicating delight a waltz can give before," said Brown, in a low tone, and immediately wished the words unsaid.

Margaret did not reply for a moment, then she said, "I am sure you will enjoy this ball, too."

"I may not be invited."

"Oh, yes. Colonel Conway and the officers of the Borderers are indispensable at a County Ball."

"And," pursued Brown, unable to keep back the words, "if I am there, will you be so gracious as to give me a dance?"

"Of course, I shall. We get on capitally." Something in his voice of sadness and entreaty touched her heart, and brought the color to her cheek, and she turned her face from him to gather some blackberries on a bramble bush which encroached on the path.

"And you are going to sing to us to-night, Mr. Brown? Has Lady Stapylton given you a good lesson?"

"Admirable. I should indeed be of the earth earthy, if she did not inspire me." Then they spoke of their accomplished hostess, until they reached the stable-yard, where Miss Neville's elderly groom was rubbing

down her favorite steed, in preparation for the afternoon's expedition.

A pleasant half-hour passed quickly in petting and admiring "Ladybird," giving her sugar, and showing off her accomplishments, such as following her mistress, picking up a handkerchief from the ground and out of the groom's pocket.

Then the luncheon-bell rang, and the party assembled to enjoy the midday repast. Lady Stapylton looked pale and worn, but Hugh Brown avoided her eyes, and made no inquiry as to her being ill or well or tired. Her silence was masked by the fluent talk of her guests, for even Margaret, though usually quiet and rather silent, had much to suggest and conjecture respecting Mrs. Everard's ball, in which the rest were deeply interested.

Early in the afternoon the little party started on their expedition. The sun had already gone slightly to the west, and the road was on the whole well shaded by trees or high hedges on that side. O'Grady devoted himself to Val. He could be a very entertaining companion when in a sensible mood, and Valerie seemed quite interested in their conversation.

Hugh Brown, therefore, was left to the undisturbed enjoyment of Margaret's society, and casting every other consideration to the winds, gave himself up to the fascination of the hour.

He was wandering alone with Margaret through an enchanted island. He was unconscious of the coloring this temporary abandonment to the feeling of the moment gave to his manner, his look, the tone of his voice. The words he spoke might have been heard by

anyone or everyone, they were absolutely untinged by the passion which had begun to glow in his heart, yet Margaret found a wonderful charm in all he said, an infinite flattery in the absorbed attention with which he listened to her reminiscences of childish days passed in the country through which they were riding. She was drawn on to speak of herself, with an amount of detail that surprised her. Then at the slightest fidgetyness of her horse, the least disarrangement of her habit, he seemed to know what inconvenienced her sooner than she did herself.

How soon those miles were accomplished. It was like coming out of fairyland, where some potent but tender magician had held her spellbound, to mingle with the others and hear mere ordinary voices uninformed by the subtle charm which had crept into his.

The custodian of the ruins supplied a tea and home-made bread, fresh watercress and luscious pears, as was his habit for the visitors who came from all sides, and having enjoyed the cup which cheers, etc., etc., Lady Stapylton and her guests wandered about the ruins, Brown keeping by her side. To inspect this picturesque relic of a bygone system was a new experience to him who had seen very little of his own country, and he listened with keen appreciation to Lady Stapylton's observations on the old monastic system, its good and bad sides.

When it was time to ride homeward, O'Grady begged leave to be Lady Stapylton's charioteer, and passed on his horse to Everard, who readily agreed to the exchange.

Then as soon as they had started, Brown discovered

that "Ladybird's" curb was too tight, and dismounted to rectify it, a delay which enabled him to secure a perfectly tête-à-tête ride home through the sweet, dewy evening air, to find Sir Robert awaiting them in high good-humor, having settled his business completely to his own satisfaction.

PART III.

CHAPTER XIII.

THAT Eden Lodge was a real paradise to Hugh Brown in his present mental state and physical mood, is not to be wondered at; but to others, indeed, to most, it was a very pleasant house to stay in. Life there was exquisitely comfortable, homely, yet refined, a happy, ideal, unpretending home.

Nevertheless, she who was at once the head and heart of the household, was also at this period about the most miserable of women, a prey to the cruellest pangs of remorse, and passionately enraged against herself for the short-sighted selfishness which betrayed her into what she felt was a crime against nature and nature's first duty.

Years of tranquil life, as a dearly-loved and respected wife and mother, a favored guest wherever she appeared, admired for her beauty, her charm, her accomplishments, had steeped her in the waters of a luxurious Lethe, which for a while engulfed those wretched memories of the degradation and despair which had once driven her to distraction, almost to suicide, only that suicide would have entailed discovery. They were not, alas, destroyed, only lulled to rest by the

anodynes of security and peace, and their awakening was terrible. Serene and satisfied with her life, with the generous, kindly companion who had made her existence so fair, so bright, happy in her tender love for the child whom she might acknowledge before the world, thankful for the beauty which made her the best ornament in her husband's house, she had gone forth in all the security of an assured position to Margaret Neville's birthday ball, when possible detection, and certain punishment struck their relentless fangs into her soul as her eyes, following Mrs. Everard's indicating gesture, first fell upon Hugh Brown.

She needed no proof before yielding to the furies that seized upon her shrinking heart. The fine form, the naturally noble air, the deep blue, steady eyes, that gazed so thoughtfully on the moving throng, the similarity of his name to that under which she had once shrouded her own identity, above all his surprising likeness to one who had been dearer to her than herself, these were a cloud of witnesses which convinced her that she saw in young Brown, of the Borderers, the V.C. who had risen from the ranks, her own son.

It was a fearful moment, but Irma Retz was a woman of courage and decision. Her reputation, her future, her daughter's future, everything depended on her self-control, and she was true to herself. What her composure cost her none ever knew.

That she should shrink from him in dread and horror was but natural. Yet, though appalled by his sudden appearance, to her own surprise, her heart went out to

him in a passion of repentance, a longing to make atonement, that made her heart beat vehemently and clouded her vision.

What an absolute cowardly fool she had been. She who had been justly proud of her courage. Why had she shrunk from telling the tale of her bitter wrongs, and recognizing her boy before the eyes of men and angels, trusting to the rough sense of justice which leavens the whole lump of mankind, when their individual interests are untouched? Now she felt, she knew, she would have emerged from that valley of deepest gloom, not unscathed indeed, but still entitled to esteem, and richer by a son, a son of whom any woman might be proud. His looks gladdened her eyes, in spite of the danger his presence evoked. But how would he speak, how would he comport himself? Would he show traces of the plebeian association to which she had abandoned him? How base, how contemptible, how cruel she had been. She was torn between the contending desire to fly from him, and to confess and do penance for her sins.

When Sir Robert presented her son to her, with kindly "bonhomie," she listened in an agony for the first sound of his voice, and that, too, cut her heart with a double-edged knife of pain and pleasure.

It was as familiar to her as if she had brought up the boy by her side. It reminded her of happy, sinless days, of a fatal error, while every tone was an unconscious reproach.

But it was a voice that went well with his looks and bearing. Rich, deep, with a certain touch of command in its intonation that charmed her. How could she

ever confess to this fair son that she had deserted him, disowned him! No! Silence, concealment, must be her portion, even to the end. Yet with the strange perversity of an impulsive, imaginative nature, she burned to reveal herself to him, to lavish atoning tenderness upon him, to load him with honors and favors. Never before had Margaret Neville seemed so lovable in her eyes as when she had asked him with kindly, graceful courtesy to dance. She seemed to take it for granted that the nature enshrined in that goodly form was as noble as excellent. But was it? Better not know. If it were, how hard to resign herself to eternal estrangement; if not, what a disappointment.

Now that Hugh Brown's visit was nearly over she was surprised to find how reluctant she was to let him go. If she could have gone on always as at present, as a respected, valued friend, that would be delightful, but she dared not, the risk was too great.

She sat in her special room the day before Hugh was to leave, and having forced herself to go through her diurnal interview with the cook, she let her thoughts go at their own will careering over the past and present, recalling every incident of Hugh Brown's visit. Suddenly a picture presented itself which made her start and quiver in every nerve.

It was of Valerie playing the accompaniment of a favorite song of his, into which he threw much expression. It was a most dangerous occupation, she knew it well, and with such a companion as Hugh, so handsome, and possessing what seemed to her newly-awakened maternal instinct, such a fascinating personality, great Heavens! suppose Valerie grew to love

him! Suppose he loved her! What an appalling complication, what misery, what unconscious crime!

She could hardly restrain herself from screaming aloud; all the energy of her nature seemed suddenly concentrated in a passionate determination to get Hugh out of the house, out of England, out of Europe. The world itself was scarcely wide enough to put between him and Val. She must stir Sir Robert to instant action on his behalf. How was it that the possibility of such an awful result had not occurred to her at the outset? She started from the sofa on which she had thrown herself to humble her soul in penitence and self-reproach, and went downstairs to look for Sir Robert.

But he was not in the nondescript apartment dignified by the name of study, and she hastily left the house to seek him in the stables. Here she found him in deep discussion of some knotty point with his head groom, an old trooper.

"Hey, what is it? Want to speak to me? Yes, by all means; come along into the garden. No? the study? Gad, it's something serious."

He offered his arm to her with an air of affectionate politeness, and they returned together to the house.

"Are you all right?" he asked, gazing earnestly at her. "You are white and heavy-eyed, or rather you have a pained look. I wish you would come away to the sea; you want toning up, you are not yourself."

"Perhaps I am a little anxious."

"Anxious? What about? Anything I can put right?"

"I think you can help me."

"How?"

"I have been thinking that we are not very prudent in having your favorite, Mr. Brown, so much here."

"How so? I thought he was A 1 with you, singing and poetizing and all that, after your own heart?"

"Yes, but you see he is very good-looking."

"Uncommonly fine young fellow."

"And girls are imaginative and a little weak, and suppose he and Val took a fancy to each other? He is no match for your daughter, and—and if this singing and playing together goes on it may be only storing up pain for both of them."

Sir Robert laughed comfortably. "I suspect in a few years Hugh Brown will have as good a chance of a well-born wife as any man. I am not so sure I should turn up my nose at him as a son-in-law."

Lady Stapylton pressed her hands tightly together, while a thrill of pain quivered through her veins.

"I should strongly object to him, Robert. It would never do. I could not endure it, and you would not oppose me in such a matter."

"Well, my lady, I fancied you had seen enough of love-making in your time not to make such a mistake, I suppose a mother thinks no girl so attractive as her own. If Val had not been yours you would not have been so blind. Why, even an unobservant old buffer like myself can see that poor young fellow, Brown, is a gone coon; but the destroying angel is Margaret Neville. He is very quiet about his enthrallment, and is far too sensible a fellow to have a spark of hope, but he is hard hit, and will have a bad half-hour of it till he has got over the attack."

"Margaret Neville!" repeated his wife, her great blue eyes gazing away into the unknown; "that never struck me. How strange!"

"Not at all strange. Margaret is a very taking little puss; she suggests all sorts of possibilities, and she doesn't dislike Brown, either. Only he is a high principled chap, I think he might give Lady Hazelhurst and the guardians some trouble; but I am not afraid of Brown."

"If you are right, and I begin to think you may be, I don't see why Hugh Brown may not carry off the heiress, as well as capture the enemy's guns. If you think him no unfit match for your daughter, why he is quite good enough for Margaret Neville."

"Aye, but Val is no heiress, nor——"

"She is Val Stapylton, and in my estimation outweighs any and every heiress," said Lady Stapylton, and she fell into a profound reverie, while her husband spoke many words of wisdom which did not penetrate to his wife's preoccupied mind.

If Sir Robert were right—and many little indications corroborative of his opinion came back to her as she thought—here was a splendid chance for her deserted boy. And what a blow to Lady Hazelhurst and the Nevilles!

Lady Stapylton was not a revengeful woman, nor was she given to unreasoning dislike, but from the date of her establishment in the county, Lady Hazelhurst had steadily and consistently done her best to belittle and undermine her in the estimation of the people amongst whom they lived, and in a careless but competent way Lady Stapylton had kept a record

which had accumulated to an amount which her enemy little knew. Yes, it would be very pleasant to marry Hugh to Margaret, to secure him a brilliant position and humble her in the dust. But would it be the dust? No! Lady Hazelhurst might be pitied for her niece's mesalliance, but not despised. She did not yet know how utterly the viscountess was in her power. And Margaret? How would she fare? Well, most happily, of that Lady Stapylton felt sure, or she would not have entertained the project, which fascinated her, for she liked the young heiress of the Nevilles, nay, almost loved her. But Hugh was a high-minded, honorable man. Notwithstanding the difficulties with which her future way was set she felt comparatively light-hearted, since her husband had opened her eyes and lifted the incubus from her spirit.

"Well, dear," she said at length, rousing herself to speak, "all you say is quite unanswerable, but my sympathies will always be on the side of true love."

"And I must say, although you are a clever woman, you are not consistent by any means."

"Of course not. I never pretend to be, and you would not like me half so much if I were," she returned, stretching out her hand to him with a charming smile.

"By Jove, you are all right," cried the gallant general, kissing it. "I don't want you to be a hair's breadth different from what you are."

"Do you not? Ah, you little know what a serpent you cherish," cried his wife, with a curious, bitter laugh, but it woke no suspicion in the simple, straightforward soldier.

"Where are the young people?" he asked.

"Mr. Everard and Mr. Brown have gone to the Moors, and the doctor has escorted the girls to look at the town hall, and gauge its capabilities for a variety entertainment. We want to repair St. Margaret's spire, you know."

"Yes, I heard something about it. Oh, by-the-way, Manvers has come back. You had better ask him over to stay. Give him a fair field, but were I a young lady I know which I'd choose."

"Poor Margaret. I fancy she will have her choice made for her."

"Make your mind easy, my lady, Miss Margaret has a will of her own. She'd buy and sell the viscountess, but there are three years of subordination before her."

"How will everything end?" said Lady Stapylton to herself.

"Oh, well; always well for honest, honorable folk."

"Perhaps."

"Come, my dear, no skepticism; I hate it like poison."

"Mr. Markham is in the drawing-room, my lady," said the butler.

"I am coming," and Lady Stapylton rose slowly.

"He doesn't want to see me," said Sir Robert. "It's to talk about your entertainment. Remember, I'm good for five pounds towards it."

The next day was Hugh Brown's last—for the present—at Eden Lodge. It was a fine gray day, and he accompanied Sir Robert to a shooting party at some distance. This necessitated an early start, too early to allow of breakfast with the rest of the party.

Everard had been summoned to a council, not of

war, but of festivity, by his mother, but promised to return to dinner.

Valerie fancied that Margaret had been a little *distrained* and not in her usual spirits, for although inclined to take life seriously, Margaret was naturally happy and easily contented; moreover, she had a keen sense of the ridiculous, though quietly displayed.

The friends had taken a long walk to see one or two of Margaret's old pensioners, and were resting under a walnut tree which was fitted with a circular bench. Both were reading letters which had come by the afternoon post, during their absence.

"Aunt Harriet returns the day after to-morrow," said Margaret, having gazed at the page before her for some moments in silence, and she sighed.

"Her return does not seem to exhilarate you!"

"Well, no, Val, it does not. After all, I am afraid I am rather ungrateful to her. On the whole she has been very good to me, and lets me do very much as I like."

"Needs must, when——" She paused.

"My dear Val, I am not the devil!"

"No, dear; but a bit of one!"

"I ought to remember, too, that she cannot help her nature. We are all in bondage to our temperaments."

"I do not like you, Marge, when you are philosophical."

"You mean reasonable, I am afraid. There is the first bell; let us go and adorn. Are you very tired, Val? I am. I should rather sit on here and have no dinner than to be troubled dressing."

"I prefer the trouble and its reward."

"A pleasant evening, pleasant talk, and pleasant music. We must make Mr. Brown sing 'The Girl That I Love.' It may be commonplace, but he manages to send it into one's heart. I wonder who is that girl that he loves. He must love some one or he never could sing with such expression; some sergeant's daughter, or perhaps a dingy Eastern Princess. I hope he will marry a gentlewoman. He ought; his future will depend very much on his wife. I wonder what his real history is? I do like him so much, and my father has the highest opinion of him."

She stole a quick, keen glance at her friend as she spoke. But Margaret did not reply, a dreamy, far-away look had come into her face.

"Come! I must make an effort to earn the reward you speak of, Val," she said at length, and rising she walked slowly towards the house, followed by Val.

Though Margaret loved to dress herself in a properly girlish fashion, her toilette was never long in making, but when it was finished she did not descend to the drawing-room at once, she drew a chair to the window, and took up a fashion paper, which she let fall from her hand as soon as her maid left the room, and leaning back she gave herself up to think and to dream. She had heard the general's and Brown's voices under her window while she dressed, this was why she lingered in her room. She had a strange, unaccountable fear of being alone with Hugh Brown, a profound though unconfessed (even to herself) consciousness that to be alone with her was a taste of heaven to him, a taste it was her duty to hold back

from him. He had never uttered a syllable of love or admiration, yet she felt rather than knew that he was absorbed by her, that when in her presence he had neither eyes nor ears for anyone save herself. She perceived, too, that he kept himself exteriorly calm, undemonstrative, almost coldly polite, by the determined exercise of an unusually strong will, but he could not prevent that electrical communication by which soul links itself to soul, and when near him, when in his presence, Margaret felt herself steeped in an atmosphere of passionate love, none the less potent because it was hopeless and unspoken. She had at the outset accused herself of vanity, of self-deception, folly and weakness, but the conviction grew and grew. It was such a pity; it would make him so unhappy, for it was impossible! What was impossible? That she should ever dream of marrying him?

How shocked everyone would be, and justly. Margaret had always despised women who had sacrificed the duties of their station, the obligations of their rank, for any love-affair with an inferior. But was Hugh Brown an inferior? No, a thousand times no. Every thought he uttered, the very struggle of will he exercised over himself, gave him dignity in her eyes. In the accident of birth, indeed, she had the advantage, but did she not always maintain that the privileges of birth were a cruel fiction. Then he had won the respect and appreciation of other men, a great recommendation to a woman. There was a certain touch of sternness in his look and tone at times, too, that made her feel that she, even she herself, would not like to offend him. She conjured up his face and form, his

beautiful, dark, speaking eyes before her inner vision. Ah, he could not always govern them ; possibly he did not know all they said. After all, she might be deceiving herself. If she were ! It startled her to think what a cruel disappointment it would be. Was this the reason why she was so depressed, because to-morrow they must part, and it was possible they might not meet again ? He was so eager to return to India, and, could it be, that life without him seemed intolerable to her ? She must conquer this madness ! If five or six years hence they met, and Hugh was Colonel commanding a regiment, his name well known to his countrymen, would he be so unfit to take his place at her side ? No, certainly not. Then why let her liking wait for success, for good fortune, and not show her appreciation of the true gold before it was stamped with the Hall-mark of general recognition ?

The sense of responsibility seemed to overwhelm her.

What was she, a young and ignorant girl, ignorant so far as experience went, to hold a brave, strong, honorable man's soul in her weak grasp ? Yet, if he did love her, it should not be weak. A tide of strange, delicious fear flooded her heart, and thrilled her nerves at the idea of his rapture, if he knew that she was on the verge of reciprocating the love she believed he felt for her. "Yet it may all exist in my imagination only. Ah ! there is the bell ; I must go down. They will all be there, and it is quite dusk. I fear I am too foolish."

Everyone was assembled when she entered the drawing-room, and all were talking, so ' Margaret slipped in unperceived except by Brown, who was standing a little

apart, looking at an evening paper, which he immediately put down.

Margaret placed herself on a sofa, and after a few moments' hesitation, he took his seat beside her.

"It seems so strange not to have seen you the whole day," he exclaimed, with a joyous impulse, which drove him into words before he could close the gates of speech.

"Yes, we have missed you and the General. Valerie and I have taken such a long walk."

"Are you tired? How far did you go?"

"About three miles, that makes six, and, yes, I am unusually tired."

What commonplace words, yet what tender sympathy in the tone of inquiry.

"You look pale and weary," he went on, letting his eyes rest on her. "You ought not to over-fatigue yourself. But I am too bold to venture on fault-finding with you."

The brief pause, the emphasis on "you" suggested infinite respect.

"Oh, no! If you care whether I fatigue myself or not, it is kindness on your part."

How sweet and gracious she was, but to-morrow it would soon all be over, and he would be driven out of paradise. Well, he would enjoy to-night, and bear his expulsion like a man.

At dinner, Everard created quite a sensation by communicating that his mother had decided on having a fancy-dress ball.

Valerie was enchanted, and Margaret highly pleased. They immediately began to discuss their dresses.

"I shall go as the Queen of Sheba," cried the former, "and borrow all mother's jewels."

"Then there will be nothing left for me but to put on the garb of a nun," returned Lady Stapylton.

"No, no! make it a Lady Abbess; you would make a superb Reverend Mother, wouldn't she, Mr. Brown? And, Margaret, you ought to be Lady Jane Grey, or something solemn of that description; you have been wonderfully serious of late."

Margaret laughed, but blushed, too. "No, thank you. That would be too neutral a tint for me. You know I like rich colors and fine things. You are much too fair for an Eastern Queen. Suppose you try Berengaria. She must have been something like you, and we must look up the 'Talisman' to-morrow."

"And you, Mr. Everard; what is your costume to be?"

"That is the worst of it, being obliged to dress oneself up. I shall copy some of the old Everards in the picture gallery. What do you think of adopting, Brown? I hope all you fellows will appear in fancy dress and not put us off with uniforms."

"By Jove, you must take me in mine," cried Sir Robert. "I am not going to travesty myself."

"You would be a lovely Doge of Venice, dad."

"None of your sauciness, my darling."

"Mr. Brown, I must offer you a suggestion respecting your costume, if you will permit me," said Lady Stapylton.

"I shall be most grateful."

"Then we shall hold high council to-morrow in my special morning-room."

"Faith, no one seems anxious to know what grand character I am going to assume," said O'Grady.

"Yes, we are," cried Margaret and Valerie together.

"We are burning with curiosity," added the latter.

"Well, then, Esculapius, no less."

"That will be most striking and appropriate," said Brown.

"A Greek costume will be the very thing for you, Doctor," remarked Everard.

"Ah! but I am going to dress the part in an original and suggestive manner. I'll have bandages gracefully wound round my arms and legs, a collar of small medicine bottles round me neck, and a coronet of lancets and knives on my lofty brow."

"You will indeed create a sensation," said Lady Stapylton smiling, and she rose to leave the room, followed by Margaret and Valerie.

"Aunt Harriet returns the day after to-morrow," said Margaret to her hostess, when they reached the drawing-room. "So I must be at home when she comes."

"Yes, dear, I am afraid you must. The longer you stay the more we miss you when you go. You must come again soon, Margaret."

"You may be sure I shall; and may I not take Val back with me?"

"Well, no, not now. When Lady Hazelhurst has been at home a week or so, and you ask her to ask Val, she shall go, but you must not forget that she is really the lady of the house."

"We must look at those books of costumes you have in the library, Margaret," said Valerie, and they plunged

into a discussion of the all-important topic which was soon interrupted by the entrance of the men.

Then the General and O'Grady settled down in a game of piquet, and the rest gathered round the piano. Lady Stapylton, who had rarely sung of late, gave them some beautiful Hungarian and Polish airs, full of pathos and passion, and played national dance-music that might have set a leaden image in motion. Everard exerted himself to persuade Valerie to come out with the hounds when the hunting season began, and Brown was profoundly silent, not knowing how to grasp the swift-flying moments of that last precious evening, and paralyzed by an intense desire to make the most of them.

At last Margaret gave him a chance. "Do sing us what you call your camp ditty, Mr. Brown, as it is the last evening of our pleasant party."

"Certainly, Miss Neville, if Lady Stapylton is willing to hear."

"I should like it very much."

And Brown sang it as if he had never sung before, throwing an amount of fire and tenderness into the repetition in the last verse:

"O! girl that I love! that I love—"

which thrilled one of his hearers, at all events, and sent her to spend the night half in sleeplessness, half in disturbing dreams.

CHAPTER XIV.

LORD RUPERT MANVERS returned to his quarters at Castletown in a very bad temper.

His eldest brother was a thorn in his side, a querulous, dyspeptic invalid. He considered that once having paid Rupert's debts, and enabled him to leave the costly regiment to which he had been attached, with character and credit, had given him a limitless claim on the younger's attention—obedience and observance. He was perpetually sending for him on the plea of bad attacks, business which no one but Rupert could manage, and other pleas; being, in fact, actuated by the general "cussedness" of his nature and the pleasure of exercising a petty tyranny.

The obligations under which the Marquis of Uppingham had laid his brother were too recent to be ignored, so Rupert felt he must respond to his elder's demands.

This time it was particularly trying, for he was anxious to stay at Eden Lodge during the week or so for which he had been invited, and the summons from Uppingham nipped that in the bud, and now the party was broken up and Margaret Neville had been restored to her aunt's guardianship. Now, Lady Hazelhurst bored Manvers immensely, and that elegant young gentleman resented being bored and was only restrained from showing his impatience by the con-

sciousness that Lady Hazelhurst was playing his game to the best of her ability, but with a want of tact which sometimes infuriated him. He was a good deal taken with the young heiress of the Nevilles, and her extraordinary indifference—as he considered it—to himself irritated him and urged him to perseverance and an almost vicious determination to succeed in his suit.

He was, therefore, bitterly annoyed at missing Lady Stapylton's house-party, and though he would not let anybody suspect it, still more annoyed that a lowborn nobody, like Hugh Brown, should have been a guest, and allowed to associate, no doubt, on familiar terms with his future wife, as he considered Margaret.

In this mood he was eating a biscuit and drinking a glass of sherry, the day after he returned, in the mess-room, when O'Grady strolled in.

"So you're back again among your loving comrades. How's the brother? All the better for the sight of your countenance, eh?"

"Perhaps so. It's more than I am for my visit to his infernal stuffy old London house, and missing the Eden Lodge party."

"Ay! and I can tell you, you had a miss. We were as jolly as sandboys, riding and shooting all day, and singing like birds far into the night."

"Hum! I thought birds did not sing after sundown."

"That's a regular matter-of-fact English answer. There's not a spark of imagination among the lot of you; anyway you would have been delighted to see how your friend Brown got on, like a house on fire, begad! Nothing went down like his songs; the ladies were wild over him, it was 'Mr. Brown here' and 'Mr.

Brown there; ' my lady teaching him Italian songs one minute, and he teaching Miss Neville billiards the next. The General treating him like a son, and Miss Stapylton aiding and abetting. Faith she is an elegant creature ! but for a pair of sweet eyes that can pierce your heart first, and melt it to a jelly afterwards, there's none to compare to Miss Neville's. Why, now, fortune is too bountiful to her ; sure such eyes and Caresford Court into the bargain are too much for any one woman."

Manvers listened with an air of indifference.

"Have a glass of sherry, Doctor?" he asked in a more friendly tone than he generally used.

"No, Lord Rupert, many thanks ; sherry between twelve and one is a pernicious habit. It will make ye old before your time."

"And Brown did the fascinating hero, did he?" continued Manvers, filling his glass a second time, as if he did not hear what O'Grady said.

"Well you know what a quiet fellow he is, never pushing himself forward, nor speaking much, but bless your soul ! the women would not let him alone, they would drag stories of India and fighting and tiger-shooting and the Lord knows what out of him. By Jove, sir, it was a sight to see when they had roused him up, he standing, may be leaning against a tree in the grounds, or his shoulder against the drawing-room chimney-piece, and they sitting gazing at him—my lady with a sort of tender smile, Miss Val with her hands clasped, and that brown-eyed darlin' Miss Neville with those same eyes fixed on him as if she was drinking in the sound of his voice. Then, of

course, my young lady of Caresford had the conquering hero for her escort out riding, and a deuced good seat he has! Begad, he's a credit to the regiment every way."

"Oh, of course, five or six years in a cavalry corps would make him ride well as a trooper," said Manvers, twirling his mustache thoughtfully.

"Ay! But he has the cross country seat as well. Everard was asking him to ride his hunter, 'Black Bess,' for the Castletown Cup, at the September Steeplechase, and Everard is no mean judge of horsemanship. He is too heavy to ride himself."

Manvers did not speak immediately, he seemed in deep thought. At last he asked:

"Where is Brown?"

"He is out under canvas, doing musketry instructor on Rownton Downs."

"Oh! How far is it?"

"Six miles good, in the Southborough direction."

"I'll go and look him up to-morrow, perhaps, to-day I must pay my respects to Lady Hazelhurst. My mother tells me she has returned to the Court. How long will Brown be away?"

"Till next week, I think," and the doctor proceeded to pour out a tide of gossip, regimental and county, enlarging on the prospect of Mrs. Everard's intended ball, and the squabbles between the Colonel and the Adjutant.

Presently Manvers looked out into the barrack square, and exclaimed, "I see my fellow has brought round my horse, so I must be off. Good morning, Doctor."

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"Good-morning; I shall look you up to-morrow, and prescribe for you, you don't seem to be quite the thing. What is it? Bile or nervous prostration?"

"A fortnight in the sort of drug-store into which Uppingham has turned his house may well account for my unhealthy aspect. He is a warning against doctors and doses," returned Manvers, as he left the mess-room.

"Lord have mercy on such blaspheming skeptics!" ejaculated O'Grady, then *sotto voce* to himself, "and I hope you have enjoyed all my pleasant information," while as he mounted his horse, Lord Rupert thought, "Damned impudent gabbling Irishman, can't believe a word he says."

Which sentences will show the amount of regard they had for each other.

In spite of his disbelief, Manvers did not feel quite so comfortable as before his interview with the doctor, while the latter, triumphant at having puffed Brown to the best of his ability, little thought he had done considerable mischief by his thoughtless and exaggerated speech. He had succeeded in putting Manvers completely on his guard.

Meanwhile, Brown was thankful for the extra work given him, for long, fatiguing days in the open air, which at least secured him rest at night, but not always.

He was, indeed, dismayed at the despair which had fallen on him, when he had torn himself from the enchanted garden, where everything save the delight of the present was forgotten.

In vain he summoned his courage and commonsense to help him in his struggle to submit to the inevitable.

He was quite aware of his illimitable folly in letting himself fall headlong in love with a woman so far and away out of his reach as Margaret Neville, yet he could not even regret the pain and grief it caused him. It was a delicious, a glorious experience. Was it not well worth all it had cost him to have and to hold the memory of the words she had spoken to him—of the sort of confidential tone which had grown up between them? Moreover, though he was amazed at his own presumption, there were words, intonations, shy glances of hers cherished down in the secret depths of his heart, which suggested that if there had been something like equality between them he might not have been unacceptable to her. To be sure she was so young, so unversed in the world and its ways, that she could not be conscious of the profound impression she had made upon him. What a terrible waste of mental force this wearing struggle was! If only Hugh could get some Indian appointment, and plunge into new interests, new work, and know that half the world was stretched between them, it might help him to endure, to recover. But, meantime, when—when—could he contrive to see her again? He would not ask to speak, only to see her; just to find her thoughtful eyes seeking his—as they sometimes did—as if she wanted to know what he thought of the opinions uttered by those about them.

All the while he thus fought with himself, he was none the less a careful, and, indeed, severe instructor; ready to discuss the progress made by the men under his command with the Colonel, the Major, or the Adjutant, who frequently rode out to see him, and

generally left him with the impression that few fellows put their hearts in their work as he did.

The evenings when the dusk had closed over the broad downs, and the bugle sang truce to the day's toil, were the worst time for Hugh. What ages it seemed since he left that appropriately-named Eden Lodge. Was he never to see any of those pleasant friends again?

As if in answer to this query which was often in his mind, one fine clear afternoon, Brown descried two figures on horseback approaching, and in another minute or two made out that one was a lady. Could it be, but no, what an idiot he was, and he started forward to meet them, as he recognized Sir Robert and Miss Stapylton.

His pleasure at seeing them was second only to what it would have been, had Margaret been of the party.

"You are indeed good Samaritans to come and see me in my solitude," he exclaimed, as Valerie bent from the saddle to shake hands with him.

"Wanted to talk with you, my boy," said the General, dismounting, while Brown called his orderly to take the horses, and assisted Val to alight.

"Nice fresh air here," cried Sir Robert, snuffing it. "How are you getting on with the new men?"

"Fairly well. Some of them will never shoot, but a few are very smart shots. We'll have a competition for your benefit presently. Meantime, I can offer you a cup of tea in a rough fashion," and he led them to his tent.

"This is delightful," said Val. "How neat and nice you have it, and some flowers, too."

"A soldier is nothing if not neat and orderly," said Sir Robert. "How long have you been out here?"

"About ten days. How is Lady Stapylton?"

"Not as well as we could wish, she has never been quite herself since that confounded ball. I cannot understand it."

"Mother's kind regards to you, Mr. Brown," added Val. "She hopes you will come and see her, she is afraid you will forget your songs."

"I shall never forget her lessons at all events, and Miss Neville, have you seen her lately?"

"Not for nearly a week. She is staying in Yorkshire with Lady Hazelhurst, at the Duke of Lanesborough's. There is a large shooting-party there. You cannot think how I miss her."

"Yes," Brown could understand that.

The tea came—very good tea and brown bread and butter, although the cups and plates were thick and clumsy, and over this refreshment the General talked shop to his heart's content, while Brown managed to answer intelligently, though all the time his brow throbbed with painful iteration. "How far out of my reach she is," and the hopelessness of his passion for Margaret seemed to eat into his heart.

Tea over, Val gathered up her habit, and they strolled out to look at the shooting, in which both the General and his daughter seemed very much interested. This over, Sir Robert said, "Val, go and rest in the tent a bit, I want to talk to Brown."

"I have not yet told you my real reason for coming here to-day," resumed the General when they were alone. "I have been up in town for a few days since

I saw you, and had a long talk with old Preston, the A. A. G., you know. He says the Hill tribes on the Northwest border are very unsettled, and the Indian authorities advise the raising of some native cavalry corps, to be ready for emergencies. I ventured to mention you as a fit and proper person to command one of them. Stop," as Brown opened his mouth to speak, "hear me out. I found that Preston knew your name and services, and is, I think, well disposed toward you. Of course he did not admit much. Now if you had the offer would you be disposed to start on short notice?"

"The day after I received it!" exclaimed Brown emphatically. "Such a chance is the height of my ambition!"

"Right you are, Brown, I believe you will do well, you have no hankering after an easy life in England?"

"Not the least; life here for a man whose heart is in his profession, can only mean stagnation and ultimate annihilation as a soldier."

"Well, my boy, I think you will get the chance you wish for, but do not make too sure, you know the Horse-Guards are kittle cattle."

"I am well aware of it, sir."

A little more talk of Brown's hopes and chances, a couple of yards of good advice, and Sir Robert went to seek his daughter.

"What ages you have been," she exclaimed. "I should have been sick of my own company but for this delightful collie," patting the head of a beautiful tan collie who was sitting close beside her, and looking lovingly in her face.

Oh! Roderick is quite an important personage and highly trained. 'Come, Rod, die for your Queen,' whereupon the creature fell flat on his side, and lay motionless. "Now then, sir, 'Live for your country,'" whereupon he started up and managed a few steps on his hind legs.

After the exhibition of some more tricks the General declared it was time to ride homewards, and the horses were brought. Brown walked for some way with his guests before taking leave of them, when Sir Robert begged him to come over to dinner as soon as he returned to barracks. "You may depend on my stirring Preston up," were his parting words.

Brown strolled back in the gloaming, thinking over Sir Robert's communication. It was in every way a God-send. Here was an occupation for his thoughts, an object for his life, a proper goal for the ambition of a man, instead of mooning like a love-sick girl, about the looks, the words, the liking of a woman to whom he never would be anything! But, how heavenly sweet she was! Nevertheless, for his own sake, he must put her out of his heart. Hitherto he had been contemptibly weak, now he had had such a possibility suggested to him he must be worthy of the chance, of himself.

So he reached his tent, and eat his very simple dinner. Then he settled himself resolutely to study an abstruse work on projectiles, and thus got through the evening, and as a reward for virtue, it may be supposed, slept better than usual, awaking refreshed and ready for the never-ending battle of life.

Shortly after luncheon time next day, Hugh was

skimming the morning paper during the noon-day hour of rest, when the unwonted sound of voices attracted his attention. The next moment a shadow fell across the entrance to his tent, and, to his great surprise, Lord Rupert entered. Hugh was perfectly aware that although Manvers always treated him with a certain frank cordiality, which was extremely effective, and just what it ought to be in the eyes of the ordinary onlookers, he had no particular liking for his preserver. He was himself extremely indifferent to Manvers, indeed the total dissimilarity of their natures was calculated to set up a degree of antagonism between them, and he was very careful never to attempt any intimacy or in any way to presume on the accident of having done Lord Rupert so great a service.

"Well, Brown, how goes it!" exclaimed the visitor, and they shook hands. "I only came down the night before last, and thought I would look you up to-day. Pretty well bored here, I suppose. Not a creature to speak to, eh?"

"No, I have plenty to do, which is a capital substitute for amusement, and I have no dislike to my own company."

"What a quiet conscience you must have. I hate being alone. What have you been doing since I was away? I hear you have been with the General and Lady Stapylton, and making your mark in the county, playing the troubadour, eh?"

"They have all been very kind, and good enough to say they liked my rude songs."

"Lucky devil; was Margaret Neville of the party?"

"Yes."

"I suppose so. There's a desperate friendship between her and Miss Stapylton, which I presume will end as these female friendships always do."

"Ah! that is a question on which I am incapable of giving an opinion. I know nothing of women's friendships or enmity."

"That is an appalling state of ignorance."

"I only know that all those I have met seem most charming, especially Lady Stapylton."

"Yes, she is a *rara avis* in every sense."

There was a pause, Manvers casting about how he could bring round the little stroke with which he intended to turn Brown's flank if he could discover that he had one to be turned.

"It was most unlucky for me to be called away, and to lose my chance of staying at the Lodge. They always make things pleasant and easy there. There is no trace of the actress about Lady S. She is somehow or other quite a gentlewoman. Mademoiselle is not so distingué. She is very like the General, sharp, clever girl. I suppose you had a lot of music."

"A good deal. Lady Stapylton's voice is still very fine, and wonderfully sweet."

"I don't think Margaret, I mean Miss Neville, sings. She is so quiet, one hardly knows what she does or what she likes."

"I have never heard her sing, but her playing is beyond the average; she is an admirable accompanist, too."

"Has she been playing the fellow's accompaniments?" thought Manvers, a flash of spiteful indignation quivering through his veins.

"Did she play for you, eh?" he asked aloud with a pleasant smile. "I think you had all my luck and your own, Brown!"

"Yes, once or twice, when Lady Stapylton was laid up with the neuralgia, which torments her so often."

There was a pause. Manvers helped himself to some whisky and seltzer. "I seem to be under Fortune's ban just now. I rode over to the Court yesterday intending to lunch with Lady Hazelhurst and her niece—horrid hot day—and found them flown; gone to a shooting party at the Lanesboroughs', so had my ride for my pains. I fancy the Duchess would like to marry her boy to the Caresford heiress, and I suppose he would have no objection, though there's no knowing how a man's taste may turn in the matter of women."

"No, of course not," returned Brown mechanically.

Manvers shot a keen glance at him, and then seemed absorbed in the contemplation of his own boots. Silence prevailed for a minute or more, then Manvers resumed.

"I am not given to talk about my own affairs, as I dare say you are aware, but, of course, I should say more to you than to most people, as is natural enough." He had rarely, if ever, alluded to the tie between them before. "So I don't mind saying that I am tremendously riled with the Viscountess for taking Margaret to Elstown Castle; she knows my hopes and wishes—she is, by the way, backing me up. We are cousins, you know; and yet she takes Margaret where she will be beset with flattery, by a man of superior rank to myself, for at best I shall only succeed to a rather poor

marquisate, which Margaret's money will help to reinstate. In short, I have grown, perhaps foolishly, to regard her as my own property."

"You are too much a man of the world to entertain such an idea, unless you had some encouragement to do so," returned Hugh, with a steady composure, which surprised himself, for in truth his heart was beating wildly with a sudden, fierce dislike of the man whose life he had saved.

Lord Rupert laughed, a slight, self-satisfied laugh.

"I don't think I have any encouragement to boast of, but whether I have or not doesn't count; I have never laid siege to Miss Neville, but given a young, inexperienced girl—and as far as I can make out Margaret has lived the life of a recluse—the first man who makes love to her, unless he is a donkey, is sure to succeed. Her own heart and nature will play the game for him, and though so tranquil, so reserved, just look at those soft, expressive brown eyes of hers, they will tell you of dormant fire, and profound tenderness. No, given a fair field and no favor, and I'll win Margaret Neville."

Did he guess that the man who sat opposite to him listening, with downcast, carefully-veiled eyes, was burning to fly at his throat, and shake the life out of him for daring to tread on such sacred ground, to speculate on those holy eyes? No! He could not, perhaps, imagine the depth of reverence and devotion of which a nature like Hugh's was capable, but he did feel convinced he was putting his companion to a good deal of temporary torture.

"You see I am older than you, and take a common-

sense view of things; you are such a cool-blooded fellow yourself, Brown, fortunately for you, that your experiences are much narrower than mine. But I don't think I am far wrong in counting on Margaret as probably my own, if that old mincing idiot, her aunt, would play fair."

"I do not question your superior wisdom, Manvers, and, of course, I am flattered by your confidence; but is it quite the thing to discuss your future wife so freely with one?"

"I am the best judge of that," said Lord Rupert with a sneer; while he thought, "Infernal, presumptuous upstart! He has dared to fall in love with her in his tepid, boyish fashion. If he had more go he might be a dangerous rival."

"I fancy you are a sentimental chap, Brown, so I think I may ask your sympathy on another score. I am rather in love with the sweet little heiress, and a strong, personal liking is rather a good beginning in matrimony; it may wear off, but it makes things comfortable at first. There is certainly something taking and uncommon about Margaret Neville, a daintiness—a touch of what seems like strength, though probably it isn't. Lanesborough is an awful noodle. I don't fancy she would give him a thought, were it not for his strawberry leaves."

"I should imagine Miss Neville superior to such low ambition."

"Oh, women adore rank. But she is a curious, dreamy little creature, and will make a charming Marchioness of Uppingham. Well, Brown, I am sure I have your best wishes, and as I know you don't waste

your words, all I have confided in you is, I am sure, perfectly safe."

"You may be sure of that."

"That old chatterbox, O'Grady, tells me you are going to ride Everard's horse at the Castletown Steeplechase. It is a stiff course."

"Rather; I have only gone over it once."

"And he means to win."

"He does. Everard is very straight."

"So much the worse for you."

"Perhaps so; I can only do my best."

"Well, I have been boring you with my own selfish concerns for the last hour. I must make my way back now. I am to dine with the worshipful Mayor to-night, so I must take a turn round the neighborhood and get up an appetite to do honor to the feast. When you come back, we must call on Lady Stapylton. I have an idea that the fair Valerie does not like me, so I want you to back me up."

"Me?" echoed Brown, with a laugh, "That is a droll idea."

"I'm quite in earnest. Why don't you go in for the General's daughter? I fancy she will have a neat little fortune. You are evidently *Ài* with her. Sir Robert would not object to a promising young soldier, and my lady has no right to be very ambitious considering all things."

"Well, Lord Rupert, I am willing to receive your confidence, but I do not want advice."

"By Jove! what an ill-tempered speech, after my pouring out my soul, and displaying the condition of my young affections to your cynical eyes. I'll be off,

now, or I shall be kicked out. Solitude is bad for you, Brown. Come in and dine on Sunday."

"If I feel in good enough temper to be decent company," returned Brown, recovering his self-command, and he went outside with his guest to see him mount and ride off.

His reflections were irritating and painful for the remainder of the day and the greater part of the night.

What a damned conceited puppy Manvers was. Was that the spirit that ruled among the men of the upper ten, and absolute absence of all chivalrous respect towards women, even towards such a peerless creature as Margaret? But he reckoned without his host, or he—Brown—was greatly mistaken. Margaret did not even like him. She was too high-minded, too much in earnest to care for such a sneering, mocking fribble as Manvers. Yet he had every possible advantage—equality, propinquity—the indescribable tone of a man of the world—rank—and the championship of Margaret's nearest of kin. Yet she would not be happy with him. No, he would wound and slight her. He would rather she were wedded to any other man in the world, bitter as it would be, than to this detested jackanapes!

If only that appointment of which the General gave him hopes would come, he would gladly bid adieu to England forever. Change of scene, abundant occupation, the absorbing interest of serious responsibility, all these would cure him of his weakness and folly. What was he that he should choose "a maiden of high degree," who had but to hold out her hand and have a ducal coronet put into it, as the

object of his first real passion—a passion as fervent, as deep, as unselfish as ever was felt by knight of old. He must never look for any recognition of it, that would be unprincipled; yet there were remembered glances, words, sympathetic touches of feeling but half-expressed that made him at moments dream—that had he but dared to try, the heiress of the Nevilles might not have been unresponsive. But he banished the audacious thought, when it came to him, and only prayed to heaven, whatever might be the fate of the girl he loved she should never be the wife of Rupert Manvers.

CHAPTER XV.

RUPERT MANVERS did the Viscountess injustice when he accused her of being false to his cause. She was, on the contrary, very true to her mother's people, but the gathering at Elstown Castle was too brilliant and distinguished to be refused. Besides, she thought it right that Margaret should have an opportunity of comparing the high-bred aristocratic class to which her aunt and herself belonged with the comparatively *bourgeois* set in Blankfordshire with which she was inclined to identify herself. It was rather provoking to observe that Margaret never showed to so little advantage. She was cold, silent, uninterested, in short, bored. The only person who seemed to attract her was an elderly, stout, gray-haired Law Lord, who certainly could talk, but their talk was chiefly about landed property, the duties of landlords, the improvements of tenantry and such dry topics.

"It is fatal to a girl to be priggish and serious," said Lady Hazelhurst to her niece, or rather her grand-niece, only she preferred the second half of that compound appellation by itself.

"Am I priggish? I am sorry. For prigs are horrid," returned Margaret carelessly, and her aunt did not pursue the subject.

Feeling that neither her protégée nor herself had

made much impression on the Duchess of Lanesborough's guests, she refused a polite request that she would stay a day or two longer, and they returned home, to Margaret's satisfaction. Home meant more to her than it ever did before. She was by nature sincere, and gifted with a keen perception of truth, yet she tried hard not to admit to herself how much she longed to meet Hugh Brown again, and see the look of eager joy leap to his eyes as they met hers. Was the reason, or the larger share of the reason, why she rejoiced to be again in her fair, stately home, because she was so many miles nearer Castletown Barracks? She blushed for herself, but the joyful sense of propinquity was not thereby diminished.

One of the first visits paid by the Viscountess on her return to Caresford Court for the autumn, was to Lady Stapylton. Not because she enjoyed that charming woman's society, but because she had a morsel or two of information which she believed and hoped might in some degree mortify the Lady of Eden Lodge. Lady Stapylton was a standing mortification, an unconquerable antagonist to the first lady in the county. Always polite, well-bred, good-humored, absolutely unmoved by the stings and darts of petty malice or veiled ill-will, she gave the Viscountess an uncomfortable feeling that she was stronger, broader, and more firmly placed than Lady Hazelhurst herself, she, Irma Retz, ex-singer and actress, that in some inexplicable manner was out of the great lady's reach, in fact, that she was a Neville by marriage, a Manvers by birth, was of no importance in the eyes of this parvenu.

That Margaret, with her innate perversity, should be the sworn friend and ally of Valerie Stapylton was an additional mortification and difficulty, for Margaret's likings and dislikings were not to be put aside.

Lady Hazelhurst, therefore, set forth in her brougham one rainy afternoon when she was sure to find her *bête noire* at home, for Lady Stapylton was obliged to avoid rain and damp.

"I was so sorry not to have been able to call before we went to Elstown Castle," began the Viscountess, after greetings had been exchanged. "I wanted to thank you for your kind attention to Margaret. It was so good of you to take her in during my absence! and she enjoyed herself so much with you!"

"The gratitude ought to be on our side, Lady Hazelhurst, she is a charming inmate."

"Margaret tells me you had quite a feast of music! You ought to indulge your friends oftener. Songs from you are indeed angels' visits in every sense."

"Oh! my voice is gone off a good deal, and I don't feel equal to much exertion, my neuralgia has been very troublesome lately."

"I trust you will be able to help us in our project of a fête to assist in rebuilding the spire?"

"Yes. I hope so. At all events, I have discovered a very efficient coadjutor. Mr. Brown of the Borders, has a lovely voice, and sings well for an amateur. He has promised his services."

"Indeed! Margaret mentioned him and his songs in her letters, and, curiously enough, I heard some particulars respecting that young man while I was away."

Lady Stapylton caught a gleam of malicious pleasure in the speaker's colorless eyes, and instantly stood on the defensive.

"Indeed," in an interrogative tone, was the only reply.

"You must know I have a sort of humble friend, she was at one time my mother's companion, rather a nice woman, quite ladylike, and I am rather foolish perhaps in my tenacity of old affections and claims—not that she has any claims! So when I am in London I generally go and see her. I was there for a couple of days shopping as I came through, and I went up to see my former protégée. She had just returned from the seaside, and was, of course, charmed to see me. After some talk she said, 'I believe you have a young man quartered near you who was a ward of my husband's.' I was greatly surprised, and afraid she was going to beg me to invite some queer upstart to the Court. 'Who do you mean?' I asked. Then she reminded me that once, long ago, a few months after poor Hazelhurst's death, I had called on her in St. John's Wood, where she was lodging, I had observed a very handsome child playing about her room. She told me a romantic story, how he was born in the house and the mother died or something, then the old landlady adopted the boy. Now I remember quite well for some time, oh, years after when they asked me to take charge of Margaret, I wanted her to be a sort of governess-companion to the child, but she had gone and married a common little man, a doctor, and lived in a place called Maida Vale, she seemed quite pleased and proud of her position. Then once when

I was calling, for I have always felt an interest in her (it must have been nearly two years ago), when a tall, good-looking young man, a common soldier, dear Lady Stapylton! walked in, and this was the same boy I had seen in her rooms when a child of five or six, and would you believe it, he is this V. C. man they make a fuss about, Lieutenant Brown! So he is evidently the son of some very doubtful woman and thrown on the hands of this poor old lodging-house—— Dear Lady Stapylton, have you an attack of pain?"

"Yes, I have an awful twinge!" and she forced herself to laugh, while she rang and asked the servant who answered the bell to bring her a glass of port wine.

"I am quite interested in your story, Lady Hazellhurst, pray go on."

"Do you know you really ought to consult Graydon Cragg, he is wonderfully clever."

"I have consulted him, but I must go to him again."

"Here the wine and the tea were brought in, and a break occurred while the visitor sipped her fragrant cup.

"Are you feeling better now?" asked the Viscountess.

"Yes, considerably."

"Then I must tell you, that, hearing (through Margaret) of Mr. Brown being frequently at the Lodge, I thought it right to let you know what I had heard. Young people are so weak and imprudent that one can never tell what fancies they may take, and I should be so grieved if your charming daughter were to be betrayed into a flirtation with a man of so very low an origin,"

"As I should for you, if Margaret should so far forget herself," retorted Lady Stapylton, with a somewhat mocking laugh. "Well, what was this lady's object in bringing young Brown to your notice?"

"Oh, nothing particular. She seemed quite proud of him, and to think him fit to associate with royalty, but I must say I think Mrs. Macnab exaggerated."

"Who did you say? What a droll name?" exclaimed Lady Stapylton, with a laugh, a curious, hysterical laugh.

"Yes, isn't it. Her husband, Doctor Macnab, is, I believe, Scotch. He seems to make good deal of money. I really must ask them down here. I can do so safely, for he is always too busy to come, and she is quite presentable."

"Of course living with you and your mother, of course," began Lady Stapylton, vaguely, and then forgot what she was going to say, gazing blankly at her visitor, but only seeing a neat, cheerful room, a little fair baby, with big blue eyes, lying on the sofa beside her, and guarded from falling off by a cushion, a little helpless morsel of humanity which she was about to desert, and standing opposite, a short, square, commonplace, shrewd-eyed man, who was saying, "never saw a finer baby of four weeks old," and since that time until she recognized the splendid-looking young soldier a few weeks ago as her son, chiefly from his likeness to one who had been infinitely dear to her, never had she repented or regretted her unwomanly act, never save once, and that was when she first felt her infant daughter draw sustenance from her bosom, then like a flash of deadly forked lightning, the baseness,

the cruelty of her conduct, was revealed to her in characters of fire, but this passion of regret only made her resolve more determinately than ever to keep her disgraceful secret from everyone; above all how could she meet her husband's eyes if it ever came to his knowledge (he who was the soul of truth and honor), and he loved her so entirely? No, let her die first, and now comes this colorless, boneless, narrow, chilly, accidental aristocrat. Was her feeble, gripless hand to tear down the curtain with which she had masked her bitter past? At the thought her natural high courage came back, and her heart answered an emphatic "never." Then the blood in her veins grew warm again, for the horror which had seized her sent an icy thrill through the electric currents of her life. She would defend her secret to the end. Oh! if God would show mercy and let the end come soon. Then she pulled herself together, and tried to understand what Lady Hazelhurst was saying. "You know I think she was foolish not to accept my offer, for, of course, with us she would have seen the best society, whereas now she has sunk into second-class, *bourgeois* mediocrity. You cannot imagine the sort of people who visit her, and she is really quite an agreeable, ladylike——"

"Mr. Brown," said the butler, throwing open the door, and standing at attention till the visitor had passed in.

"Mr. Brown!" repeated Lady Stapylton, rising with a smile of welcome, and inspired with a sudden desire to make much of him, to lavish all possible attention upon him.

"It is quite an age since we have seen you, Lady Hazelhurst, I do not think you know Mr. Brown!"

Her ladyship bowed and murmured something inarticulate.

"No, I have not that honor," said Brown, glancing round with a flash of hope that Margaret might be somewhere about. "I have been away in charge of a party for musketry practise, and so unable to have the pleasure of calling."

"Yes, I know, Sir Robert and Val quite enjoyed their tea with you. Rownton Downs are delightfully fresh and breezy."

Then followed inquiries for the General and Miss Stapylton on Brown's part, and for the Colonel and O'Grady on Lady Stapylton's.

Then that audacious parvenu Brown, V.C., addressed the Viscountess. "Lord Rupert," he said, "was good enough to give me a lift as far as the gate here. He was on his way to the Court."

"Ah! indeed! I am sorry to miss him, but he will find Miss Neville; she has a slight cold, and I made her stay at home."

"Then Lord Rupert will amuse her with the latest London gossip, for which, by the way, I do not think she cares a straw," said Lady Stapylton, helping Brown to a cup of tea.

"Rupert can be very entertaining," returned the Viscountess, drawing herself up, and then with an air of returning a thrust, she continued. "Apropos of London, I saw some friends of yours, Mr. Brown, when I passed through the other day."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Brown, opening his eyes in amazement. "Who, may I ask?"

"A Mrs. Macnab—whom——"

"Mrs. Macnab!" in a joyous tone. "Yes, indeed, she and the doctor have always been my best friends, I owe them an infinite amount of kindness."

He was quite delighted to hear of these people then, and in no way alarmed at the possible exposition of his most obscure origin. What a curious incomprehensible set of people the low-born are!

"I was staying with Doctor and Mrs. Macnab when I was in town, and enjoyed myself greatly. The children whom I had seen in the cots the night before I sailed for India I found nearly men and women. In fact, their house is the only approach to home I know." This was addressed to Lady Stapylton.

"It is very unfortunate not to have any home memories," said the Viscountess, with a slight sniff.

"Oh, Lady Hazelhurst, I have forgotten to ask you if you think of going to Mrs. Everard's ball. We are very full of our dresses."

"I am not sure what I shall do. It is a mistake, I think, to give a fancy ball. It is so troublesome, and elderly people look absurd in out-of-the-way garments, but I suppose I shall be expected to go."

"Oh, people of our age can always find something appropriate among the long array of historical personages. Val is going as an ancestress of mine."

"Oh! indeed!" in an incredulous tone.

"Yes, the daughter of a Huguenot refugee, who married a Baron Retz, and after whom she is named. She defended a fortress of the Retz against the Austrians."

"I hope the costume will be becoming, Margaret

wants everything to be provided by the Castletown tradespeople, which will give a great deal of trouble."

"She has talked us, too, over to her plan; I think it will be a popular movement."

"I have paid you quite a visitation, dear Lady Stapylton. Now I must ask you to ring for the carriage! I should be glad to catch Rupert before he leaves. I hope, Lady Stapylton, you will let your daughter come to us next week. Margaret is naturally a little moped after the gaieties of Elstown Castle."

"Ah! certainly! Those girls are not long happy apart. Well, good morning, Lady Hazelhurst; very glad to see you looking so well."

She walked to the drawing-room door with her distinguished guest, and then made way for Brown, who followed to see her to her carriage.

The resolute rally which Lady Stapylton had forced herself to make, before the unexpected onslaught of Lady Hazelhurst, still upheld her, and to Hugh Brown she seemed better and brighter than when he had bidden her good-by more than a fortnight ago.

"I hope you are free from the neuralgic attacks which tormented you when I was staying here, Lady Stapylton?" asked Hugh, when he had seen the Viscountess drive away.

"Thank you, yes, for the moment I am tolerably free, but never for long. And, tell me, are you not glad to have got through your period of banishment, and to be back in barracks again?"

"I by no means object to a spell of solitude, Lady Stapylton, though I should not like to be long alone. The fault of modern life is that one never has time to

think. Then the air on the downs is delightful and invigorating."

"I must say it does not seem to have done you very much good. You look thinner and darker than when you were here last, more worn, too, as if you had neither eaten nor slept well."

"You are very good to notice my looks," returned Brown smiling. "I assure you I have nothing to complain of. All I want is a cup of your very refreshing tea."

Lady Stapylton poured out one, and handed it to him in silence. Her eyes met his as she did so, and he fancied that they seemed full of tears, only that was not likely.

"Sir Robert is in town," she said rather abruptly. "He is always running away now. I think he wanted to catch General Preston as he passed through. He wants to stir him upon your behalf."

"Sir Robert is very good to me, and so are you, Lady Stapylton." There was a touch of emotion in Brown's voice. "I do not know why you should be, but I feel all the more grateful."

"There's much in one's actions and impulses for which one is puzzled to account. Of course, Sir Robert knows you, and has seen enough to make him believe in your future. I have different reasons, or rather no reasons at all, only instinct and sympathy, but I feel it is bad for you to stay here."

"I agree in your opinion, but I should like to know why you think so, Lady Stapylton!"

"I cannot answer that distinctly. I feel rather than perceive your present life is perhaps rather too fas-

cinating in some directions to be indulged with safety. A man of different nature from yours might turn the fascination, the attraction to account. I do not think you could do this, Mr. Brown, you would only torment yourself. It is far better for you to be away, far away, carving your road upward and onward, I did not think this at first ; I do now."

Brown flushed all over his embrowned cheek, but met the speaker's eyes steadily. "I do not think I understand you," he said. "Of one thing, however, you may be assured, you cannot be more convinced of the desirability of my going to India, or anywhere out of England than I am ; indeed, I shall do so in any case. As soon as I know certainly that the General's most friendly efforts on my behalf have failed, which is not improbable, I shall offer to exchange with some fellow who prefers remaining at home to soldiering in the East, and try my luck abroad. I entirely agree with you that it would be better for me in every way."

"Yet believe me, I should regret losing sight of you ; your likeness to my dear brother has drawn my heart to you!" She paused for a moment, and resumed : "I want to arrange with you about the Everard ball. Will you come here the day before the festivity, and go with us? I told you I had a costume which I thought would suit you. A Magyar costume, of a hundred years ago. Val will have one of the same date, and I am sure there will be nothing like them in the room. I should like to see you wear it, and wear it as it ought to be worn,"

"Thanks, many thanks, Lady Stapylton. I shall be most happy to wear anything you suggest. I will try

and secure a couple of day's leave about that date. It is a great pleasure to come here. Perhaps by that time I shall know my fate."

"Perhaps!" echoed Lady Stapylton, and silence fell upon them. She sat profoundly still, her hands clasped upon her knee; a look of pain, of profound melancholy saddening her fair face.

"Life is so strange," she exclaimed, as if to herself. "We are such slaves to circumstances."

"Yes, they are almost omnipotent, yet strong men can turn them to their own purposes sometimes, not often."

"Not often, indeed! When they do, it is through the force of self-mastery. There lies the secret of success."

"Of that I am quite convinced," returned Brown. Then he rose to leave. All this time he had burned to ask for Margaret, but feared that his voice in uttering her name might betray him to his kind but keenly observant hostess. What an extraordinary affinity seemed to exist between them: how well she understood him.

"You are going, Mr. Brown? Well, try and get a week's leave if you can, and stay on with us after the ball. Valerie will be sorry to have missed you. She went with the Rector's wife to see old Mrs. Markham, who has been very unwell."

A few more farewell words and Lady Stapylton held out her hand. Hugh took it, and urged by a sudden impulse, raised it to his lips.

"I hope you are aware how grateful I am to you for your great kindness."

Then he went away. Lady Stapylton watched him as he crossed the lawn, to a little gate which admitted to the woods, and a path which was a short cut to Castletown. When he disappeared she sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

CHAPTER XVI.

To be "so near and yet so far" from one you love, for a glimpse of whose eyes your own ache, for the sound of whose voice your ear thirsts, is a sharp trial, and Hugh Brown was undergoing it now.

He was in truth astonished at his own state of mind, of feeling. Being an essentially strong man, women had not been much to him hitherto, and also, taking life very seriously, regarding it as a game to be played boldly, cautiously, with determination to succeed, he found no amusement in flirtations, nor was he thrown in the way of women who were of the kind that could attract him.

Once, indeed, in India, he was nearer danger than he himself knew. His sympathies were drawn out by the pretty refined wife of a sergeant in his own Troop, who was a drunken blackguard, and, as usual in such cases, bestowed most of his blackguardism on his wife. Brown was immensely sorry for her, and equally angry against him. She was, however, a thoroughly good woman, and soon took fright at the amount of pleasure and comfort she found in Brown's sympathy and society, managing to convey to him her dread of barrack gossip, and its probable consequences, so the threatened evil melted away, before the light of common sense and rectitude.

He never dreamed he should be so suddenly, so completely absorbed in any woman, as he was in Margaret Neville, whose rank and wealth fixed such an impassable barrier between them.

If there be such a thing in the spiritual portion of human beings as chemical affinity where, when once within the sphere of each other's influence they rush, like alkali and acids, to blend in one, it existed between the humbly born Brown, V. C., and Margaret Neville, of Caresford Court and Barnonston (another estate in a neighboring county).

He had never met any one like her before, she seemed to him at once a queen, to be served and adored, a delicate, inexperienced darling, to be protected and preserved from the ills of life.

Hugh Brown was remarkably free from personal vanity. His weakness, if such a paradox is admissible, was hardness; he expected a great deal from his fellow creatures, but also from himself, and he by no means came up to his own standard.

That women should like and admire him never crossed his brain, he neither valued nor desired such nourishment for his "*amour propre*," yet a subtle something which he could not explain or define told him that somehow or other he interested Margaret Neville. Her eyes told him that, so did her soft, thoughtful smile, and the manner in which she appealed to him respecting various subjects on which she was ignorant. The faint possibility of her loving him, were they on more equal terms, added fuel to the fire already burning fiercely in Hugh's heart and veins, while he felt it would be infamous to take the smallest

advantage of the slight tendency to favor him, which he did not actually perceive, though he was dimly conscious of an electric link between them.

It seemed to him cruelly hard that he never could see Margaret; other men encountered her driving or riding or dining at the houses of the neighboring gentry; he never did. He did not care to call unbidden at the Court, and he felt he was not particularly welcome to Lady Hazelhurst. He grew desperate in his hunger for a sight of her, and with the conviction that his time in England was growing short, for certain information reached Sir Robert Stapylton which made him feel tolerably sure that his favorite and protégé would obtain the appointment he sought. Brown wanted to revel as much as he could in Margaret's presence, and now the precious days rolled by and still the pangs of heart-hunger were unappeased.

It was a fine mellow autumnal day, and Brown determined to walk over to Eden Lodge by a short cut, a path which led over a common across the further end of the lime tree avenue leading to the Court, and through a wood beyond.

He went at a brisker pace than he thought, and, finding it still early, threw himself on the low bank to rest, to dream, to inhale the delicious perfume of the leafage that sheltered him.

He had not lain there long when a light rustling of the grass and leaves told him that something living moved near him, some tiny inhabitant of that sweet solitude. He lay quite still, not to frighten it away, for he was extremely fond of animals, and liked to see them enjoy their modest lives. The next moment he

was struck mute and motionless at finding Margaret's large soft brown eyes gazing down into his own, while a smile of amusement played round her mouth.

"Do you often take a nap here?" she asked, as Brown sprang to his feet and raised his hat.

"I was not asleep. I was enjoying an excursion into dreamland! This is a delicious place to dream in."

"Yes, I often come and dream here myself," she returned. "I love this sweet avenue. Do you remember, Mr. Brown, the night of my ball, when you admired the house. I told you its surroundings were far more charming than the house itself."

"Yes, I remember every moment of that evening, every word you uttered!" he cried, forgetting to guard his eyes, and half-puzzled by the quick color which flashed over her fair face.

"Pray sit down on this mossy green divan!" she went on, placing herself on the bank, and motioning him to sit beside her.

"I must pray for pardon if I am a trespasser," said Brown. "I am on my way to the lodge, and this is a short cut, I am told."

"No, not a trespasser, Mr. Brown, rather an honored guest," she returned with sweet, gracious dignity. "I rather expected to meet Valerie Stapylton this afternoon. Let us wait for a while, though she may not come."

"I think I saw her ponies in the town this morning."

"Then it is not improbable she may walk over this afternoon, and she always comes by this pathway; it is a pleasant walk."

"Valerie is very active; she gets up ever so early,

and does lots of things. I am rather lazy, I am too apt to let my hands drop and waste my time thinking vaguely. Of course, you can do a great deal when you think hard and consecutively."

"I imagine that if you had work to do, Miss Neville, you would do it diligently."

"I hope so! But that is the blank in my life. There is no necessity for me to do anything."

"To many that would be the supreme good."

"No, Mr. Brown. Not to many—to a considerable sprinkling perhaps. The mass of people must not be lazy or the world would never go on."

"Nevertheless, Miss Neville, yours is a fair lot, and you have a goodly heritage. This grand avenue is in itself a possession—and landed property gives great weight and importance. How many you will influence when you have the direction of your tenantry!"

"Ah! That is a responsibility I shrink from—my ideas are so confused. It seems to me so hard that some have all the wealth and ease and beauty of life, and others the burden and heat of the day. The ugliness, the coarseness, the jagged, tangled ends of the web! I often ask myself what I must do to make the people round me better and happier—more at ease—more refined, less toilworn! Ought I to establish some great co-operative institution, such as might be organized in my beautiful Court?"—She stopped abruptly, and cast a wistful glance around.

"Certainly not," said Brown emphatically, "do you think the untrained—the uneducated would be any the better for an idle life? Nothing would ensure deterioration so completely. The sentence passed

upon our first parents when they were driven from Eden to till the ground whence they were taken, 'In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread' was a blessing in disguise, and contained the germ of all progress, all improvement. You long for work. Everyone who has aspirations beyond a mere animal existence hates idleness."

"Yes, I think so! I suppose it is my innate depravity, that is, indolence, that makes me shrink from responsibility. If my poor father were living or I had an elder brother to manage the estate, I should love Caresford ever so much more; I do not feel equal to the burden."

"Your strength will come! After all, our safest course is to follow the lines laid down for us by the gradual development of society, and help to improve what already exists. I suppose all soldiers lean to aristocratic institutions," he added with a smile. "Society is like a regiment. You have the rank and file, the non-commissioned officers, the superior officers, and if discipline is not strict and obedience unhesitating, why the corps is more dangerous to its friends than to its enemies! I don't think people are sufficiently alive to the beauty and nobility of obedience. For my own part I should not hesitate to enforce, even with the greatest severity, absolute, unquestioning obedience in those under my command, as I hope I should always give it to those under whom I should serve. This is the keystone to society. It is cruelty to leave the ignorant and untrained to their own devices—and call it liberty. You must hold on to your just authority, Miss Neville, and never be de-

luded into giving up your beautiful home to be turned into a piggery—in the hope that undisciplined human nature would retrieve itself, unaided by those who have had higher and better training! But I am shocked at my own presumption in thus lecturing a—a being so far above me as you are,” and his eyes looked into hers with infinite tenderness and sorrow.

“In many ways I am much below you,” said Margaret, as if to herself, and clasping her hands round her knee as she sat on the low bank under the spreading limes. “You must have thought a great deal.”

“Practise forces reflection on one,” he said, stroking back his golden mustache thoughtfully, “and I was very early compelled to put my theories into practise.”

“I fancy you could be a very stern commander,” she said, rallying from the seriousness which had crept over her, and smiling with distracting sweetness upon him. “I should be quite afraid of you were I under your command.”

Hugh closed his eyes for an ecstatic instant. Then he exclaimed, “What an extraordinary idea! You have not, I suppose, the faintest conception how absolutely you could dispose of me?”

The words had passed his lips before he could stop them, but it did not need the vivid blush which rose to the roots of her hair to remind him that he had let go the reins of his self-control, that his speech was bold, presumptuous, ungentleman-like, and he hurried to say what he could to efface the bad impression he must have made. “You see, Miss Neville, I am an old-fashioned sort of fellow, and like to feel that I might vow myself to the service of some fair lady,

even were she ever so far away out of my reach, whose excellence was worthy of all devotion and respect—to whom, as to a patron saint, I might pray—even though I should never see her face again!”

“That is indeed romance! I wonder if men ever really felt like that? Or was it the invention of minstrels and troubadours?” she said thoughtfully.

“I believe they did,” he returned in a low tone.

“Come,” said Margaret, rising, “Val will not pass by here to-day. Come back with me to the Court and have some tea. Then I want you to sing one or two songs; I am sure your voice will sound well in the music room.”

“Lady Hazelhurst will think——”

“That is of no consequence, Mr. Brown. If you are at my disposal I shall insist on implicit obedience, or you will be a forsworn knight.”

“Enough,” cried Hugh, “I’ll never dispute a command of yours.” He was greatly relieved that she treated his unfortunate speech in this playful spirit, for he was alarmed at his own audacity.

If only the avenue had been a few miles longer, and that delightful walk could have stretched for hours!

As it was it seemed to have lasted about five minutes.

“Is Lady Hazelhurst alone?” asked Margaret of the servant she had summoned by ringing the front door bell.

“No’m, Miss Stapylton and Doctor O’Grady are with her ladyship.”

“Ah, then we missed Val. Come, Mr. Brown, and let us get over our tea-drinking.”

She led the way to Lady Hazelhurst’s morning-room,

and found tea in progress. Val, in a lilac dress, a smart hat with feathers to match, and a black lace scarf, had evidently been paying a formal visit somewhere.

O'Grady, very tightly buttoned up in fashionable mufti, was deeply occupied with delicate brown bread and butter.

"Why, Val, you are quite magnificent! Where have you been? Mr. Brown and I have waited for you at the end of the avenue for half an hour! Then I persuaded him to come on to tea. Aunt Harriet, you know Mr. Brown?"

Lady Hazelhurst bowed stiffly and rang for a servant to pour out tea—for the unwelcome guest.

"You are late, as usual, Margaret," she said, coldly.

"I have been calling on Mrs. Conway to make mother's excuses, so was obliged to put on my war-paint. Mother was to have dined with her to-morrow, but I am sorry to say she does not feel equal to it, especially as she wants to play your accompaniments at the concert, Mr. Brown, the next night."

"I hope Lady Stapylton will not give herself any trouble on my account!"

"Oh, she does not wish to miss it herself."

"Let us see what we can do, Val," said Margaret. "I'm sure you accompany very well."

"Faith, you're a lucky young fellow, my boy," said O'Grady, "to be petted and walked about and accompanied by charming girls, and elegant matrons? Isn't he now, my lady?" to the severe-looking hostess.

"I do not quite understand you. Of course, we are

all anxious to do our best for the St. Margaret's concert."

"Begad! We are all ready to kneel at St. Margaret's shrine," cried the doctor, with an indescribable wink. "I have entered myself for one event. I'm to give a recitation, 'The night before Larry was stretched,' a new version with a happy ending—of my own composition, a great improvement I can tell you. Did you ever hear the ditty, Lady Hazelhurst? It was all the vogue in Dublin a hundred years ago."

"I cannot say I know anything whatever about it," said the Viscountess, who detested Doctor O'Grady as an irreverent and savage Irishman.

"Never mind," he returned indulgently, "I'll give it to you in style at the variety entertainment on Thursday."

"Come, Doctor O'Grady, come and do audience, we are going to rehearse."

A delightful couple of hours ensued. Various songs were tried, and suggestions for possible encores made. At last the doctor called for his trap, which was duly brought round, drawn by a rather disreputable-looking, rat-tailed pony. Val was to dine and sleep at the Court, so Brown accepted O'Grady's offer of a lift back to barracks.

"Faith! by all that's fortunate you're the favorite, Brown, my boy! Why don't you make hay while the sun shines? Sure, my Lord Rupert would be tearing his hair if he saw how the charming heiress looked at you and spoke to——"

"Look here, O'Grady, you are a good fellow, and I like you, but if you ever dare to speak such damned

infernal lying nonsense in my presence, or behind my back, I'll take you by the throat and shake the life out of your gossiping old carcass."

"God bless us! There's ingratitude! Well, well, mum's the word!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE variety entertainment for assisting the "new steeple fund," had been most successful; everyone contributed according to his or her ability. Lady Stapylton defied her neuralgia, and made her appearance on the platform to play Brown's accompaniments. He sang two songs and two encores—but nothing could persuade him to give them "The girl that I love" though Lady Stapylton did her best.

Lord Rupert made himself useful as one of the stewards, in a careless, capable way, managing to prevent anyone from having many words with Margaret Neville, and Dr. O'Grady surprised everyone by the effect he produced with his recitation, into which he threw humor, pathos, and a final touch of wild despair, which was very telling.

"The fellow is a born actor," said Manvers to Margaret. "I can never quite make him out. I sometimes think he chooses to pass as a buffoon. I believe he is really clever, and in the regiment men, women, and children are all fond of him."

"I like him, too, and he amuses me—but——"

"Don't suppose I like him!" interrupted Manvers hastily, "and I fancy I am no favorite with him."

"I rather think your natures must be antagonistic," returned Margaret, who was watching Brown furtively.

He was amongst the audience, and talking to Valerie Stapylton, who had played a "pot pourri" of popular airs on the violin, in which Margaret had accompanied her—both young ladies having been much applauded. Was it possible that Hugh Brown would not speak to her? Would not come near her?

Manvers instinctively knew that while Brown was within sight he would get little attention, and hastened to plant some poisoned darts in Margaret's *amour propre*.

"It is very amusing to be a 'looker-on,' especially when one has '*le mot de l'enigme*.'"

"How so, Lord Rupert?"

"Oh! there's Brown, for instance, he is trying to make the running with the General's daughter. It would be a great catch for him! But all the time his eyes are stealing in this direction," he laughed, a bitter, mocking laugh. "I really believe our ideal ranker has fallen a victim to your bright eyes. Oh fair, pale Margaret!"

"I am neither pale nor fair, Lord Rupert. I am very brown, and at this moment red with the heat of the room."

"No matter—pale or fair, the result is the same! It is too preposterous! I ought to apologize to you for naming such a possibility. But the poor fellow has the sense not to overreach himself, as to recognize the solid advantages connected with Miss Stapylton."

"Your keen perception goes far beyond my limited faculties," returned Margaret, coldly.

"Ah, you are offended—and naturally. I owe you an apology. Then—look at Everard. He is at

the other side of our charming friend, and I fancy much more acceptable to her."

"Mr. Everard! Why, they are always quarreling."

"What will you bet that they twain be not united in holy matrimony before another year is out?"

"No, Lord Rupert, I will not make my particular chum the subject of a bet!"

"I sit rebuked, Miss Neville! I am really unaccustomed to this high tone. And yet you refuse to improve me. Just think of the amount of good you might do me if—ah, there's our V. C. going to sing again. What applause! He is the victor to-night."

"Well, pray, listen to him."

Lord Rupert had succeeded in making Margaret uneasy, and even unhappy. How dare he speak of Hugh Brown as so infinitely beneath them both that any evidence of admiration on his part for herself was infinitely presumptuous. "If he knew—if he only knew," she thought.

By this time Margaret had dared to look at the true state of her own heart, and knew she would rather be the wife of Brown, V. C., the "ranker," as Manvers scornfully called him, than of crowned king or belted earl. That she loved him, not with the mere passionate fancy of an easily-caught imagination, not because he was the handsomest man she had ever looked at, but because all he said—all he looked—had a certain strength and nobility in it that found an echo in her own soul. And yet they would drift apart, this man whom she felt she could lean upon and trust to the uttermost. For he would never, never approach her, and she—how could she dare offer herself to him! She

had never liked Rupert Manvers; to-night she hated him sincerely—this sneering, fine gentleman for whom Hugh Brown had risked his life.

The evening wound up with a grand supper at the Mayor's, to which only the biggest bigwigs out were invited, and from which Brown was excluded. Lady Stapylton was so much fatigued that she begged off. Her husband and daughter accompanied her home, and Margaret was left unsupported—or rather afflicted, by having Manvers carefully placed beside her, where he gave himself the airs of a devoted and favored admirer.

Next morning the "Blankfordshire Courant" and the "Castletown Independent" announced—one with stately solemnity, the other with flippant fluency—the probability of an alliance between "our charming and distinguished neighbor, Miss Neville, and that brilliant young officer now quartered in our midst, Lord Rupert Manvers."

When Lady Hazelhurst, with an approving smile, pointed out this paragraph to her niece she was a good deal startled by the outburst of real downright anger with which it was received.

"Those miserable, ignorant outsiders! How dare they take such liberties with my name! What right have they to make any conjectures on the subject—to mislead everyone? I hope, my dear aunt, you will disabuse Lord Rupert of the idea that such a marriage is possible. He ought not to be deceived. Of course, as marrying me means marrying Caresford and Baronstone, and all the rest, it may be of importance to him, so pray let him know what I say."

"No, Margaret! I will not let him know you are capable of talking in that violent, ill-bred manner. Rupert can find plenty of wealthy girls ready to marry him, girls just as rich and well-born and perhaps as good-looking as Margaret Neville. Though he is foolish enough to idealize you, as I never knew him idealize anyone else."

"Oh, I do not doubt there are plenty of women who would marry Rupert. He can be pleasant and insinuating, and I wish him all good fortune, but I do not want or like him—pray remember that, Aunt Harriet."

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But though he was omitted from the Mayor's supper nothing could displace Brown from his position as the favored guest at Eden Lodge. Here Margaret met him a day or two after the concert, and the three performers discussed the concert in all its aspects. Another day she again fell in with him in the Lime Tree Avenue, when somehow, in spite of himself, his feet brought him to that enchanted ground. Margaret perceived that he was more distant and reserved than he was when they met before the variety entertainment, at which both had assisted, and attributed the change to the audacious report spread abroad by the local newspapers. Then Valerie asked her father's favorite to walk over with her to the Court, where she was going to ascertain what had become of Margaret, who had made no sign for three whole days.

Lady Hazelhurst was evidently anything but pleased to see them, and said Margaret had a slight touch of

influenza, and had not come downstairs, nor would she leave her room, a statement which was speedily contradicted by the appearance of that young lady all smiles and pleasant welcome; though she looked pale, and had a weary sadness in her eyes, which it distressed Valerie to see, while it made Hugh's heart throb with passionate eagerness to know what it was that threw a shadow over her quiet spirit.

It was a happy afternoon, however, for Lady Hazelhurst, who was quite satisfied that Brown was paying court to Valerie, left the three young people to themselves in her disgust, comforting herself with the assurance that Manvers was coming to dinner.

So they lounged and talked in the library, and looked at some of the family portraits in the hall, whose history Margaret detailed, and every moment thus passed riveted Hugh's chains more closely, even while he silently prayed for work in some remote region, where he would be out of temptation, and given the chance of forgetting.

"Come, Mr. Brown," exclaimed Val at length, "I must go; as it is 'the shades of evening' will be closing o'er us before I can reach the Lodge, and you must not desert me. Come back to dinner, my mother and the General will be delighted to see you. Not dressed? Oh, never mind that, we are alone! Margaret, I think you are an impostor! You have no more influenza than I have. Shall you be at the races on Thursday?"

"I am not sure! My aunt says she will not. She disapproves of steeplechases—says they are a debased, modern invention."

"I do not quite like them myself," said Brown, "but I rather like to ride one."

"Then come with us, Marge! I think my father will ride over, and we shall have lots of room. I am rather sorry mother is so bent on going, for she is so nervous now! Not a bit like herself. Full of the danger of the big leaps, and yet determined to see them. Of course we all want John Everard's horse and his jockey to win," and she gave Brown a friendly little nod.

"Isn't Lord Rupert going to ride?" she added.

"Not in the steeplechase. He will for the 'Gentlemen's Challenge Stakes' next day."

"Then, Val, dear, I will go with you. I have never seen a steeplechase, and although, like dear Lady Stapylton, I am afraid of it, still I want to see it!"

"Then come to dine and sleep to-morrow, Margaret, and then you will be on the spot, for we are to start rather early."

Margaret readily assented, and Val bade her good-by. Margaret's last words to Brown were, "I do hope you will win!"

"Trust me—I will try hard," pressing the hand she had given him unconsciously until Margaret's changing color told him he had been indiscreet.

To Lady Hazelhurst's infinite annoyance Margaret refused to leave her room that evening.

"It is an ill-tempered whim!" she exclaimed, when the servants left her and Manvers to the wine and walnuts. "She came down this afternoon, and talked for nearly three mortal hours with that Miss Stapylton, and—who do you think, Mr. Brown! The way in

which Sir Robert Stapylton lets his daughter walk all over the country with a man who, but for a lucky accident, would be blacking her boots or grooming her horse!"

"Halt, là!" cried Manvers, laughing. "Brown is a fellow that's sure to rise. He is not one of your hewers of wood and drawers of water. He is a deuced fine fellow, my dear cousin. I should be right glad to see him married to Val Stapylton, I can tell you."

"Married to Miss Stapylton—that man!"—an astonished pause——

"Oh! I have my reason I assure you!" and he laughed in a way Lady Hazelhurst did not like.

"Your gratitude to that Mr. Brown is quite exaggerated, Rupert. After all, a little fighting, more or less, doesn't signify much for a man who is used to it."

"Your logic is incomparable," cried Manvers, laughing, still more heartily. "You forget, my dear Lady Hazelhurst, that men do not become habituated to lose their lives, especially for other people. Believe me, Brown will surprise us all some day. He is the making of a big man—and his presumption—for he is presumptuous in a quiet way—is not likely to diminish. So he paid you a long visit to-day?"

"He and Val Stapylton were here for ages!"

"Ha! And your charming niece was well enough to endure the feast of reason and the flow of soul for three hours? It is not surprising that she can bear no further fatigue, but I suspect the true reason of her secluding herself is that impertinent paragraph in the local Press—what meddling, insolent dogs those

journalists are! I'd like to thrash them within an inch of their lives—or an inch over them. Margaret is naturally hurt and offended and part of the blame falls on my innocent shoulders. Pray do not allow yourself to be vexed with Margaret—leave her to me, I'll smooth her down!"

"My dear Rupert, my pleasure or displeasure is of small importance in her eyes. Her indifference to me is unaccountable and most mortifying. I don't think that girl has one bit of heart!"

"So much the better for herself. Believe me, heart is a very disagreeable ingredient, impossible to reckon with and uncertain in the extreme."

"I detest heartless people."

"They are easier to get on with, I assure you."

Lord Rupert proceeded to soothe and amuse Lady Hazelhurst and divert her mind from Margaret's delinquencies, for Manvers was fully resolved to marry the heiress of Caresford, and hoped to make of Brown an instrument to that end. He wanted her money sorely, but he also wanted herself. He had fallen in love with her in his fashion, and was keen on gratifying both cupidity and passion.

Lady Hazelhurst was thoroughly out of temper, as everyone in the Court knew. She wasted a vast amount of breath in the endeavor to persuade Margaret not to go to the Steeplechase, but in vain.

Miss Neville, as was her habit, went her own way—she dined and slept at Eden Lodge, and started in excellent spirits for the Racecourse. The race was much like all races—some of the jumps were very stiff, especially coming near the stand.

To Margaret the whole scene was one of wild excitement, though for her there was but one figure in the whole scene, and that figure wore the Everard colors. How well he looked, how well he rode! Absorbed as she was, however, she was greatly struck by the state of nervous tension in which Lady Stapylton seemed to be.

"Men ought not to be allowed to risk their lives in this way for what they call sport," she murmured. "That water jump is frightful!"

"I do not think it is so bad as this double range of hurdles almost in front of us. But Mr. Brown rides wonderfully well."

Here the General cantered up. "They are tailing off," he said. "But I say Brown will do it yet; he has both pluck and judgment; one of the best horsemen I ever met. Here they come!"

Of the ruck only four came to the front—of these one turned nasty, and would not face the hurdles, do what his rider might; another caught his hind hoofs in the furze bushes, which were entwined in the fence, and rolled over, dragging the hurdle with him, while Hugh with a cut of his whip raised Everard's "Black Bess" to a powerful effort, cleared the first row of hurdles, and rose a second time to surmount the next row, galloping on ahead, while the only remaining competitor made a scramble of it, losing way, and only coming in a bad second.

When Brown came close up to the formidable jump, Lady Stapylton, to Margaret's immense surprise, clutched her arm with an almost painful grip, whispering, "Will it be death or life, death or life?"

"Life," returned Margaret, reassuringly. "I see his face, it looks like success."

The next moment a rolling thunder of applause ran along the lines of spectators, who broke their ranks and inundated the course with a human tide, following the victor to the weighing tent, shouting "Everard forever," "Hurrah for Brown, V. C.," "Blue and white always to the fore."

"Some water quickly," said Margaret to the General, who ascended to the stand to talk to them. "Lady Stapylton looks faint."

Before it was brought, however, she had rallied, but both Margaret and Val, who had been on the top of the stand with Everard, and now joined them, were alarmed at her exhausted state. They urged her to return home, but she was almost impatient at their counsels, and insisted on waiting to see and congratulate Brown.

It was some time before he made his appearance and came in Everard's company.

He was very quiet and unmoved. He said they had been to see Johnson, who had had a bad fall at the last fence, and was likely to be laid up for some time, then he and Margaret exchanged a glance which proved to both how unnecessary words are sometimes.

Everard and the General were both excited over the triumph of the white and blue, and while they discussed the race with much animation, Margaret remarked the kindly, almost tender attention Brown bestowed on Lady Stapylton; at last she pronounced herself ready and willing to return home, but pressed Margaret and her daughter to remain. They insisted on accom-

panying her, however, and she walked to her carriage leaning on Brown's arm.

"How nice and gentle he can be," observed Val, as the two girls strolled through the shrubberies, when they had administered tea to Lady Stapylton and settled her comfortably on the sofa in her bedroom. "No woman could be more tender. Jack Everard was saying so just as we came away. I do like Mr. Brown, and I am awfully sorry for him!"

"Why?" asked Margaret, quickly, and as she met her friend's eyes, the color flew to her cheeks.

"Yes," said Valerie, answering with a blush. "You know quite well why he is to be pitied." It was the first and only time Val ever alluded to the subject, for neither she nor her friend were the kind of girls who giggle over their conquests or would willingly degrade a topic so serious and sacred as love,—with mocking jest or careless laughter. Margaret's only answer was the best; it was silence. For her matters had indeed grown serious. The growing conviction that she lived from day to day on the hope of seeing Hugh Brown, of meeting his eyes and hearing his voice, made her tremble for the future, and the suffering which probably awaited there. And how fair a life they both might have—if—if he loved her, but of this she could not be sure. How could she? There were moments when she believed he did, then came doubts and terror of betraying herself. Then her wealth, her position. These were insurmountable barriers. If he could only know how proud she would be to call herself his wife, she trembled at the fearful joy of the idea.

And across the web of these thoughts shot the warp of wonder, of surprise, at the great preference shown for Hugh Brown by Lady Stapylton ; she felt there was something more than met the eye beneath it. Yet she loved her hostess for it, as she never did before—could it be possible to take counsel with that sympathetic friend ? No. She saw herself face to face with Lady Stapylton, and knew that her tongue would refuse to utter the confession which she must make before she could ask advice. No. She must let herself drift, and trust to chance to save her from the pangs of parting. And she could give him nearly all that the heart of man could desire ! But a mere impalpable barrier of cobweb—yet constraining as links of iron—separated them. That, of course, depended on the all-important question which another and less fortunate Margaret once tried. “ He loves me ; he loves me not.” No ; she could do nothing.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FEW days after the steeplechase, came Mrs. Everard's ball.

Brown, instead of being before time, as he usually was when he dined at the "Lodge," was a minute or two behind.

"It's as well we have an early dinner, as my lady has to dress you up, and you are just a trifle late," said Sir Robert, good-humoredly, as he shook hands with his guest.

"A thousand apologies, this is my excuse," returned Brown, handing him a yellow envelope.

"A telegram, eh?" opening and reading it. "Good! Listen to this!

"'Call on General Preston, Horse Guards, to-morrow, three o'clock.'"

"You see, I had to catch the Colonel and get leave and telegraph reply, which took time," said Brown.

"Yes, of course it did, and time well spent. You are sure of the appointment, my boy; and I believe you'll climb aloft quickly."

"I congratulate you most heartily," said Lady Stapylton, holding out her hand.

"But you will have to go away, I am sorry for that," exclaimed Val, with frank cordiality.

"Thank you, thank you all heartily for the great

friendliness you have shown me," said Brown with emotion, and he kissed Lady Stapylton's hand.

"This probable promotion will, of course, expatriate you for the best part of your life," said she, and there was the sound of tears in her voice.

"That, of course," he returned, "but apart from the pain of saying good-by, it is the best thing that could have happened to me."

"By George, you are a cool-headed fellow, Brown; you don't seem a bit excited at this stroke of good fortune. Dinner, eh?" to the butler as he opened the door. "Come along, then! Give us some champagne, Barnes, we must drink your health, my boy."

Dinner over, Brown retired to his room to don the handsome and picturesque costume which Lady Stapylton had lent him; having received strict injunctions from her ladyship to present himself for inspection in her private sitting-room, that she might see that the dress was properly adjusted.

"Fine feathers make fine birds," thought Brown, as he looked at himself in the long cheval-glass. "The things fit wonderfully, though they are a trifle tight across the shoulders." He left his room and went to find his hostess.

She was sitting in a low, deep arm-chair, her head resting on her hand, and when she started up, he thought there were traces of tears about her eyes.

"Ah! there goes the London express!" she said, as the long, shrill whistle of a train came to them on the breeze, the line just there coming close by the boundary of Sir Robert's property.

"What train do you take to-morrow?"

"The 11:20."

"Yes, that reaches town at 2:30. I suppose you are fairly sure of being sent to India?"

"I think so, if I accept the conditions, which I am pretty sure to do."

"Now let me see how you look! You have remembered my directions very well, the slings of your sword ought to be longer, loosen the buckles a little, and tighten the straps of the dolmen, now the fur cap; it is lucky you can take it off for dancing, it is quite too hot to wear, but you must keep it on till you begin to dance."

She stepped back and stood looking at him a moment or two in silence. "There!" she exclaimed, "what a marvelous exact likeness! Ah, how it transports me back to the bright, young, innocent days!" She turned from him and covered her face with her hands. He heard that she was struggling to suppress her sobs, and stood silent and embarrassed, wondering what she should say or do.

But Lady Stapylton soon recovered herself, and coming to him, laid her hand on his shoulder caressingly.

"You will write to us, Hugh, when you are away in India; you must write to me!" He saw that she was unconscious of having called him by his Christian name. I will always answer and that is more than Sir Robert would promise."

"I shall be only too glad: and shall greatly prize your letters."

"Ready," said Sir Robert, looking in. "Remember we have a six-mile drive before us. 'By Jove, Brown,

you are a swell! He'll cut them all out, my lady. By Jove! Manvers will be nowhere!"

"Of course not," said my lady, calmly. "Be sure you enjoy the ball!" she said addressing him.

"I fully intend it," he said earnestly. "It is the last dazzling scene I shall see for many a day."

"Here is Val—come along, Val. Brown is quite magnificent. Let's have a look at you!"

Valerie's costume was a feminine counterpart of Hugh, and became her remarkably.

"A Magyar brother and sister," said Lady Stapylton gazing at them.

"The effect of dress is most extraordinary," said the General thoughtfully. "I protest there is a likeness to-night between these two; I never noticed it before."

"Nor I," said Lady Stapylton, "but I do now. It is very curious."

"I wish you were coming, mother," said Val, kissing her. "It would be ever so much nicer!"

"I hope soon to get to sleep and to forget," returned Lady Stapylton. "Now go, my dears; good night."

The Everards' house was not so well suited to a grand entertainment as Caresford Court. The rooms were less lofty, the hall less spacious. It had, however, an air of greater antiquity and was extremely picturesque. It seemed more suited to the contrasts and varieties of a fancy ball than the stately and more modern dwelling.

Margaret Neville arrayed herself in a very simple costume, having rather to her aunt's disgust chosen

the dress of a Norman peasant. It suited her very well, but produced no great effect—in short, she might have been overlooked beside her more brilliant friend. But this gave her small concern.

Though she knew it was unreasonable, she found herself looking forward to this festivity as to a turning-point in the story of her life. As she dressed, a feeling of nervous expectation grew upon her; by the time she reached the scene of festivity, she was almost tremulous, and looked pale and anxious.

Lady Hazelhurst was always painfully punctual, and they reached the Everards' abode before dancing had begun. Margaret lingered as long as she could in the ladies' cloak-room, for she heard in passing there that the Eden Lodge party had not yet arrived.

But Lady Hazelhurst was impatient, in fact she was a little out of temper—she was vexed at the simplicity of Margaret's attire. "You look like a daughter of some poor half-pay officer," she said in a discontented tone. "You are really the most ill-dressed girl here."

"Oh, I shall dance and enjoy myself all the same," said Margaret philosophically.

"Perhaps so, because everyone knows you, but everyone will say that Margaret Neville was the greatest dowdy in the room!"

"I do not look so bad," returned Margaret, looking at her own image in the glass. Then Lady Hazelhurst left the room with an air of determination, and Margaret was obliged to follow.

At the door of the ball-room they stopped to speak to Mrs. Everard, and while so engaged a brilliant

figure approached in gold-embroidered velvet with jeweled buttons, a fur-edged dolman, a splendid saber and half-high boots; but though disguised by so extremely un-English a costume, Margaret recognized Brown immediately, saw too, that there was something of repressed excitement in his eyes, his bearing.

He looked wonderfully handsome, and dwarfed all the other men present. Margaret blushed at the pleasure his fine presence and grand style gave her. Was she foolish and commonplace to exult thus in mere good looks?

"My son is looking for you, Miss Neville," said Mrs. Everard, smiling upon her young guest. "I think he wishes to secure your hand for the first dance." Margaret smiled, she knew that he had already secured Val for a partner, and now saw them approaching arm-in-arm.

"Here is Mr. Everard," she said, "and the partner he has wisely made sure of in time."

Mrs. Everard looked annoyed, but only for a moment. Clouds of ill-temper seldom obscured her broad, good-humored face for more than a few moments.

"Then, John, where is Miss Neville's partner?" she asked.

"Here, if she will have me," cried Lord Rupert, advancing from where he stood behind his hostess. He wore the dress of a Life Guardsman of Charles the Second's time, and wore it well.

"Oh, with pleasure," said Margaret carelessly, while her eyes sought Brown's with a reproachful look, and she held out her hand to him as she bade him good evening, adding, "I do not see Lady Stapylton."

"She did not feel quite equal to the fatigue of such a festive evening; it is a pretty scene."

"Very pretty," echoed Margaret, wondering what it was that gave her such a troubled foreboding of coming change and sorrow.

"Will you be good and generous to me," returned Brown, in a lower tone. "Spare me all the dances you can; for I am under sentence of exile, probably for the term of my natural life—and—and I want to gather up a store of delightful memories to feed upon hereafter; I would not dare to presume so far, had I not some excuse to urge."

Margaret's answer was to hand him her card. He selected two waltzes, and then hesitated. Margaret nodded to him with a smile and a blush—he paused and put his initials against a set of lancers which came between.

"Then you will tell me all about it," she said as Manvers returned to claim her, having found a vis-à-vis.

The first dance was a sober quadrille, such as was danced more frequently five-and-twenty years ago than they are now. It gave Manvers abundant opportunity to make himself agreeable, and, preoccupied as Margaret was, she was amused and interested. But Lord Rupert could not refrain from a few sneers at the magnificence of Brown's attire—though throwing in some faint praise—to "damn" him further. Margaret kept herself well in hand, and showed her nimble-tongued partner no sign of the offense he gave her; one observation of his surprised her a good deal. "Miss Stapylton's costume evidently comes from the same wardrobe as Brown's," he said presently. "She looks

remarkably well, but not quite like herself. Do you notice that she has an extraordinary look of Brown to-night?—not a likeness exactly, but a fitting resemblance that flashes and vanishes? I never saw it before."

"Yes," she exclaimed, "I do catch a likeness between them that is quite astonishing at moments," gazing earnestly at Valerie's animated face, and I also see glimpses of Lady Stapylton, though Val will never be a beauty like her mother."

"She's uncommon good style," said Manvers, "and more taking than many a regular beauty—and, by George! old Jack Everard has come out strong to-night! That's a regular genuine cavalier's dress—belonged to his ancestor, Sir Jasper Everard."

For the rest of the dance Margaret was very gracious, and Manvers flattered himself he was beginning to find favor in her eyes at last.

The quadrille over, Margaret went to sit by Val, from whom Jack Everard was obliged to part, as his duties of host required him to be here, there and everywhere.

"I am so sorry, Val, your mother is not here."

"Yes, so am I, especially as I am quite sure she is more unwell than she lets us know. She is looking so thin and worn—have you noticed it?"

"Well, yes—just lately. Do persuade her to go abroad for a little while, she is fond of the continent. You are looking so nice, Valerie, your dress is quite charming. Do you know Lord Rupert Manvers has been finding out that you are like Mr. Brown."

"Indeed, what a compliment!" cried Val, laughing.

"He is a great favorite of ours. Handsome men are generally so stupid and conceited, but he is so simple, and yet keen and bright, and now he is going——"

"Miss Neville, they have just played a bar of the waltz to summon us," said Brown, beside her. She rose at once and took his arm, and as they entered the ball-room the band burst into the dreamy, delightful strains of "Die Tausend und ein Nacht." No time to talk now—with equal eagerness they swung into the measure, and Margaret felt herself supported and guided with the skill and steadiness which had impressed her—when? Six weeks, or six years before?—at her own house. All of real life she had ever known seemed concentrated in that short spell of time. Why had she let herself go as she had done? It was madness—it was wrong—unmaidenly—reprehensible in the extreme, but end how it might, it was heavenly for the moment.

At last Brown paused to let her breathe, steadying her with his arm.

"And tell me," she asked, "when and where are you going?"

"To India," I believe; but as yet I know nothing certainly. I have been summoned to an interview with General Preston, and Sir Robert tells me I am to be offered the command of some irregular cavalry about to be raised on the Northwest Border, to keep the Hill tribes back."

"And that means your being stationed there indefinitely?"

"I suppose so—at any rate, India will be my field of work for the future."

"Are you—very glad?"

"I am naturally greatly pleased—it means a certain career."

"And is there no one you are sorry to part with?" playing nervously with her fan.

"Oh! I should not dream of presuming to trouble you with my joys and sorrows," he returned calmly. A man who has to cut his way to fortune must be proof against sentimentality."

"But not hardened against affection."

"Do not tempt me to fruitless confession," he exclaimed, with suppressed vehemence. "'The heart knoweth its own bitterness,' and talking about it does no good. If you will not think me sententious I will quote another proverb—'To bear is to conquer one's fate.'"

"That sounds very brave!—but I think, in spite of your philosophy, you are unhappy." She raised her eyes to his, with a glance so full of tenderness and sympathy that Hugh dared not endure it, and religiously turned away his own.

"I scarcely know how I feel; I only know that for the moment I am bent upon enjoying myself—on forgetting there was a yesterday—save one, or that there will be a to-morrow. Let us take another turn—you will be indulgent to me—this last night?"

"When do you go?"

"To-morrow."

"What, for always?"

Did he deceive himself, or was there an echo of pain in her voice?

"No; I fancy I shall return for a day or two." He

slipped his arm round her, and at that instant, a couple almost came against them. Instinctively he held her closely, fondly to him ; she even felt the strong throbbing of his heart. A strange dimness seized her, a sense that life—that, at least, all that made it worth living, was about to escape her grasp—she could not direct her steps—her feet failed her. Brown perceived that something was wrong, and again stopped.

"You are tired—do you feel faint? he asked.

"It seems absurd, but I fancy I must be, though I never fainted in my life. I should like to get near an open window."

"There is a conservatory close by, and beyond, a terrace ; will you venture out? The old house, all lighted up, looks well from the outside."

"Oh, yes, I want air."

The ball-room was crowded, and there was a door near them ; so Brown with swift decision drew his partner into a corridor outside, then through the conservatory to the terrace beyond.

"You do not feel cold?" he asked anxiously.

"Not at all, I only feel refreshed, and very much ashamed of my weakness ; you will think me silly."

"You are not responsible for the effects of heat and crowding. Here is a seat. I will go and find you a wrap."

"No, no, my peasant's dress is quite protection enough. How sweet and fresh the air is! Tell me, what will be your work in India?"

"I am not sure, but from what Sir Robert tells me, I fancy it will be chiefly connected with the organizing of a native corps—work I shall like very well. I shall be independent, and have the praise or blame as I deserve."

"Then you speak Hindustani?"

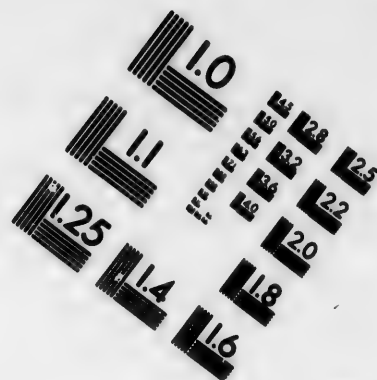
"Yes, fairly well; I made it my study from the beginning of my stay in India; you can do little without it—I mean in the way of working up," and Brown went on to speak of the life of a soldier in the ranks, urged by Margaret's questions, and feeling it safer to speak than to sit in silent contemplation of the charming little figure beside him; for Margaret's simple costume only emphasized her personal distinction. From her picturesque Norman cap with its delicate lace, to her dainty little shoes with their gold buckles, she looked a fairy princess masquerading, and in a week, perhaps a few days, he would have lost sight of her forever. It was hard to bear, especially as all his tender reverence for her could not hide from him the feeling, rather than the conviction, that in her inexperience, her ignorance of her own social world, she had probably idealized him as a chivalrous hero; whereas, when knowledge and maturity came, she would blush for her own folly in committing herself to a man who was lower than the lowest because of the utter obscurity which shrouded his birth.

Something in her companion's steady composure enabled Margaret to recover her self-mastery, and she felt she ought not to linger there until the dancers again dispersed and would probably wander out into the dry, clear night.

"Let us go indoors now," she said rising. "It is delightful here, but duty calls," she added smiling.

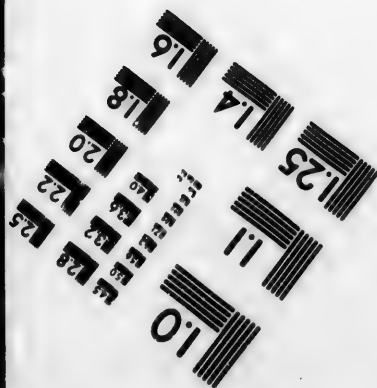
"And we must obey," returned Brown with a sigh, and he stood up beside her.





A resolution test chart featuring various patterns of horizontal and vertical lines of increasing frequency. Each pattern is accompanied by a numerical value indicating its resolution. The values include 1.0, 1.1, 1.25, 1.4, 1.6, 1.8, 2.0, 2.2, 2.5, 3.2, 3.6, 4.0, 4.5, 5.0, 5.6, 6.3, 7.1, 8.0, 9.0, 10, 11.2, 12.5, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22.5, 25, 28, 32, 36, 40, 45, 50, 56, 63, 71, 80, 90, 100, 112, 125, 140, 160, 180, 200, 225, 250, 280, 320, 360, 400, 450, 500, 560, 630, 710, 800, 900, 1000, 1120, 1250, 1400, 1600, 1800, 2000, 2250, 2500, 2800, 3200, 3600, 4000, 4500, 5000, 5600, 6300, 7100, 8000, 9000, 10000.

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"You said 'to bear, is to conquer our fate.' It is a fine sentence, but a very disagreeable process."

"Does she mean that as a hint to me to practise what I preach?" thought Brown as he offered her his arm, and said, "I hope and believe your fate will be all sunshine."

"You know that too much sunshine gives sunstroke. I went last year to the spring races at Hillsden, not far from this, and there Val and I had our fortunes told by a great gaunt Meg Merilees-looking gipsy woman, Val was to marry wealth, and state, and a good man, and everything was to be delightful; but I was to lose everything I possessed and become quite poor, but not unhappy."

"Well, I think that gipsy was rather out of her reckoning. Possession, Miss Neville, is nine points of the law."

"I am not ambitious and I do not care for grandeur, but I should not like to be poor."

"No, it must be awfully hard lines for a woman to be poor. I have been poor all my life, and probably will be; but it has never hurt me a bit."

These words brought them to the smaller of two rooms, set apart for dancing. The Lancers were just over. Margaret and Brown mixed with the wandering couples, thus seeming to have taken their part in the dance; and their absence passed unnoticed.

One more enchanting waltz crowned this ecstatic, yet tormenting, night. In the pauses, which were frequent, for both felt the need of speaking—it might be for the last time; Brown said after a short silence, "I am uneasy about Lady Stapylton—the General

ought to be afraid to consult some great authority on nerves. There is something working terrible mischief there. Do you not see how changed she is? She has been infinitely good to me, indeed, it will be a real pain to me to bid her good-bye. Will you suggest to Sir Robert to seek the best advice? He thinks so much of you."

"Yes; or, better, I will speak to herself—we are very great friends, especially as she is so beyond me in years, as in everything else. I am ashamed to say I have not noticed her much of late. I am growing selfish—Valerie foretold me I should."

Brown slightly shook his head with an admiring smile, and they floated away to the delicious music.

"Are you ready to come home?" asked Val, soon after supper. "I think the dear old dad is fidgeting to get away—and you must start early to-morrow."

"Yes, I am quite ready," returned Brown; for whom the light and joy had faded away, for Manvers had taken Margaret in to supper with an air of proprietorship positively maddening.

"Sir Robert and Miss Stapylton are going," said Brown, a few minutes afterwards, arresting Margaret, who was going to dance with a young nephew of the hostess. "I must then say good-night."

"But not good-by," she returned, with a perceptible falter in her voice.

"I hope to see my friends here once more," he said, gravely, then held her hand for a moment, and was gone.

"Had you a gay ball?" asked Lady Stapylton, when

her daughter brought her her breakfast next morning; for she rarely took that meal downstairs.

"A most charming ball," exclaimed Val, who had her own reasons for specially enjoying it. But I do not think Mr. Brown was amused, he was absolutely silent all the way home—indeed, my father was so pleased about his being sent for by General Preston and meeting one or two old friends, to say nothing of having won two rubbers at whist, that he did talking enough for us all. I wish you had come, mother dear. It was a very pretty sight; but none of the men could compare with Mr. Brown. I wonder who his parents really were?"

"God knows!" murmured her mother.

"It is well he is going away for, his own sake," returned Val. "I am afraid he is desperately fond of Margaret, and that is impossible. He hides it very well, but I have been so much with them both. She was very nice to him last night. Lord Rupert looked as black as thunder."

"And Margaret, does she reciprocate in any way?"

"No, no; I don't think so—at least, I am not sure. You know, mother, she is a curious, resolute little thing; if she once made up her mind she would marry Mr. Brown in the face of all opposition."

"It is much better for every reason he should go to India, much."

"I suppose so! He desired me to say good morning to you."

"What! is he gone?"

"Yes, he was off about half-past eight. He had to see his man, and put up a change of raiment, you know,

before catching his train. I believe he is to stay with those friends of his, the Macnabs. Margaret says Mrs. Macnab has refused to come down. Why, mother dear, you are ill—faint—what is the matter?" And she flew to get the eau de cologne.

"It is nothing! I had a very bad night. I could not help listening for the wheels of your returning chariot, my love. Take away my tray; I cannot eat—indeed I cannot."

"This will never do, dearest mother. I will make my father insist on your seeing some big doctor."

"Only leave me in peace—only leave me alone." murmured Lady Stapylton, turning her face to the pillow.

And Valerie obeyed, but soon returned to coax her mother to dress and come out for a drive.

PART IV.

CHAPTER XIX.

LADY HAZELHURST had rarely been so openly cross and actively disagreeable as the day after the ball. People had absolutely noticed how often the heiress of Caresford danced with Brown, V. C., who had risen from the ranks, and who was, the Lord knows who. Also that she was apparently on intimate terms with him. It was all the fault of that silly old enthusiastic General Stapylton, who thought every stout soldier the peer of princes. Just see the way he let his daughter go about with a quite common man of that kind. In short, the Viscountess let her irritation master her to such a degree that she ventured to attack the culprit.

"I am sure, Margaret, I had anything but a pleasant evening."

"Indeed, I am sorry for that. I thought it a very pleasant ball."

"I think you must be aware, my dear, that you gave me a great deal of annoyance."

"Did I?" said Margaret, opening her eyes and really astonished.

"Yes! The way you danced with that Mr. Brown,

and walked about arm in arm with him, exposing your folly to the whole county—it was too bad.”

“But, Aunt Harriet, I really do not mind how much the county sees me walking about with Mr. Brown. I know and care nothing at all as to where he came from and who he was. He is at present an officer, and certainly a gentleman! He amuses—no, interests me, more than any of the other men, and why should I not dance with him as well as any other of Mr. Everard’s guests?”

“You are dreadfully obstinate, my dear. I know there is very little use in speaking to you. I am sure I do not know what Rupert will say to my neglect of my duties as a *chaperon*, but I know he was vexed.”

“Lord Rupert is your kinsman, you are fond of him; so of course his opinion has some value in your eyes. Now, I do not care for him—nor for what he thinks, and I would advise you not to trouble about it either. You are tired—and I do not like to see you looking so uncomfortable. Do put on your bonnet and drive over with me to see Lady Stapylton—I am afraid she is far from strong.”

“No, thank you, Margaret. You know I disapprove of the way in which the General and his wife have taken up that Mr. Brown—he is always at the Lodge, besides, Rupert is coming to luncheon, and I shall consider it very rude if you go out—though, indeed, you make me feel this is not my house.”

“You must not say such things, Aunt. It may not be your house, but I hope you consider it your home—and a happy one. If my going out offends you, I will stay at home for luncheon—but I must go out after.”

And not caring to waste more words upon her aunt, Margaret stepped through the window and wandered away into the grounds to live the ball and some of its incidents over again.

She was rather silent at luncheon, but very gentle and civil. Lord Rupert, however, was intelligent enough to recognize an indefinable something of a steely vein running through her pleasant softness that made him feel it would be no easy task to win her. This, however, he was determined to do.

Luncheon over, Margaret announced her intention of driving over to the Lodge, and asked Manvers if she could set him on his way back, but he declined, being engaged to meet one of his brother officers at a village in another direction, in order to see a hunter which was for sale. Margaret, therefore, bade him good morning and departed.

When they were alone, Lady Hazelhurst sighed, and put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"What is the matter?" asked Manvers, carelessly.

"I have had such an unpleasant scene with Margaret."

"Oh, indeed! Is she a bit of a vixen? I shouldn't have thought it—she has a will of her own I can see."

"She has indeed! I told her how distressed I was at her making such an exhibition of herself last night."

"How?" he asked, frowning until his close-set eyes nearly disappeared.

"Why, don't you know that everyone was talking of the way she went on with that man Brown?"

"I know there is a majority of fools everywhere, and I see that Miss Neville is a great lady to her fin-

gers-tips. If she commits an indiscretion, it will be on a great scale. Did you remonstrate with her on this score?"

"Of course, Rupert, I did my duty."

"Then you did very wrong! This is one of the many cases where 'least said soonest mended.' If you put Margaret's monkey up, she might run away with Brown, or rather, deliberately and defiantly walk away with him if he asked her. He is a punctilious sort of fellow, but he's a man after all; and your niece is a dainty and most tempting morsel, apart from her broad lands and minority savings. However, we are both in luck. Before a fortnight is over, Brown will be steaming across the wide ocean to India—probably never to return—when he does, I hope his former friends there, Lord and Lady Uppingham, will have the pleasure of receiving him. It is amazing how he has got on. I wonder how he escapes the fatal reputation of a prig? But he does. He has so much pluck; he dares to be himself—to do and say what he likes and believes. But I doubt if any woman will ever get the better of him."

"He must be a very unamiable person, said Lady Hazelhurst; "but then he is, of course, devoid of a gentleman's weaknesses."

"Perhaps so! Pray, Lady Hazelhurst, keep quiet for the present. As soon as Brown is safe off, I'll take up the running. Remember I do not admit that your very charming niece has anything more than an imaginative admiration for Brown as a sort of ideal hero, but that might be irritated and opposed into a '*grande passion*.'"

"You are very clever, Rupert; you ought to be in the House really."

"I can tell you, my dear kinswoman, if Uppingham does not drop soon, or somebody give me a thousand, I'll soon be in a house—not of legislature. I'm awfully hard up. Could you stand a temporary loan of £500? I think you might."

"Why, Rupert! your brother cleared you, didn't he, last year?" ejaculated Lady Hazelhurst, as if thunder-struck.

"Two years ago, my dear cousin—and that is a long time. The fact is I was tempted by a most promising speculation, and acting under excellent advice, ventured my little savings, and lost——"

"Very imprudent, indeed—and I assure you I have been very unfortunate in my own speculations (very small ones); so that I can hardly make both ends meet."

An animated colloquy ensued. Manvers stuck to his guns, and did not leave the Court without a precious slip of paper in his pocket, on which were written three figures—and Lady Hazelhurst's signature.

While this conversation was going on, Margaret sent her ponies along at a good pace to the Lodge. Brown's request that she would speak to Sir Robert about his wife's state was to her a command; but on her arrival Sir Robert was out, and she was shown up to Lady Stapylton's private sitting-room.

The lady was sitting at a large bureau of inlaid wood and foreign make, looking through a pile of papers.

"I am afraid I have disturbed you," said Margaret.

"It is an agreeable interruption," returned Lady

Stapylton, closing the circular top of the bureau, and locking in all her papers. "I am always glad to see you—but Valerie is out."

"Then may I pay my visit to you?"

"Certainly. Tell me about the ball last night."

Margaret complied—then she spoke of how much Lady Stapylton was missed, and brought the conversation round to that lady's health, and by a sudden inspiration told how concerned Brown was about it.

"Is he—is he really?" and she smiled softly, thoughtfully. "I think Mr. Brown rather likes me."

"He does indeed, very—very much; and do not think me presumptuous, dear Lady Stapylton, if I beg you to take some great doctor's advice; you are not like yourself—you are not well."

Lady Stapylton took Margaret's hand, and began to stroke it in an absent way, while evidently thinking deeply.

"No," she said at last, "I am not well—no one knows it, as I do. But, at present, no doctor can do me any good. Later I may be better—more fit for medical aid—then I may seek it—nay, I promise I will. Meantime, dear child, I forbid you to speak to Valerie or the General on the subject, they are uneasy enough. And now, not another word about me. Tell me how you liked Val's dress?"

"It was quite charming and so uncommon. So was Mr. Brown's. The two best dresses in the room. Do you know, Lord Rupert said they looked like brother and sister."

"Indeed! what a strange idea!"

"Yes, they are not really like, but last night I did see a likeness."

A long pause ensued—then Lady Stapylton made a bold stroke. "I have fancied him like myself."

"So have I at times. The features are like, but the expression is different."

"Real resemblance is in expression much more than in features." Another silence, then voices sounded on the lawn below.

"Ah, there is Valerie," cried Lady Stapylton. "Pray, Margaret, do not mention my health to her. I promise to consult a good doctor—to do anything and everything, if you give me time."

She had hardly ceased to speak when Val entered, looking bright, alert, and embodiment of health and hope.

"Ah, Margaret, I was thinking of going to you! But I met Mr. Everard, who wanted to see my father, so he dismounted and walked back with me from the Rectory."

"Then do return with me, Val; and dine and sleep at the Court. You will not mind, dear Lady Stapylton? I am rather miserable; Aunt Harriet is so cross, which makes things uncomfortable. For though I do not mind very much, still I hate to see her vexed—and it bores me. Do come, Val!"

And Val consented.

In fact, Margaret dreaded to be alone, and with Lady Hazelhurst she was always alone. The tormenting consciousness that Hugh Brown would soon—in a few days—be far, far away; that she could not keep him—that the happiness of her life was slipping from her

grasp—that Hugh loved her and would never tell her so—and yet, how could she be sure of it—and so on—the old perpetual round, till she felt dazed and dumb with the sense of helpless suffering—of being bound in impalpable fetters. But the pride of sensitive delicacy upheld her; and even Valerie only dimly suspected that her nearest, closest friend was ill at ease.

Valerie remained a second day with Margaret, but the third she insisted on returning to her mother.

As they were driving towards the Lodge, and not far from the park gates, they met Lord Rupert Manvers riding.

“And where are you bound for, Mesdemoiselles, may I ask?” was his salutation.

“For the Lodge,” returned Val; “I have been staying at the Court.”

“You’ll not find the General, I met him also; he is going to see Brown, who arrived early this morning. He has taken office—capital opening for him. They give him just ten days to make all his preparations for, I suppose, a lifetime out of England.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” cried Val, with a glance at her companion’s pale face. “People are sent here, there, and everywhere in the Army. He may be home again in three years.”

“Not very likely, especially as he has nothing to come home for.”

“Well, good-by, Lord Rupert,” said Margaret. “The ponies are very fresh this morning; I cannot hold them still. You’ll find Lady Hazelhurst at home.”

“No doubt I shall,” thought Manvers, as he raised

his hat. "I am beginning to think myself another old woman, I am so frequently left by the young ones."

"My father will be sure to bring Hugh Brown home to dinner," said Valerie, after they had driven for a few minutes in silence. "Do stay, Margaret; we must hear him sing, 'The girl that I love,' before he goes."

"Thank you, Val; but I do not think I can leave Lady Hazelhurst without any warning," and Margaret's voice had a degree of constraint Val had never heard in it before.

"You can send a note as soon as we get to the Lodge, or drive back and tell your aunt."

But the devil of perversity had entered into Margaret, and she would not let herself do that which she longed to do.

"Aunt Harriet has been rather cross lately, and I do not want to vex her any more just now."

"Oh, well, I suppose you know best what you want," exclaimed Valerie, a little impatiently, while thinking to herself, "I am sure she is miserable. If I were in her place I should not let him go. Why is he so foolish as to hold back? Margaret, you must give Mr. Brown a chance of saying good-by," she said aloud. "You must see how desperately gone the poor fellow is about you."

"Oh, do not let us chatter about our admirers like a couple of ordinary, second-rate girls," said Margaret coloring vividly. "And why do you fancy that—that——" She broke off abruptly.

"That Hugh Brown is in love with you? Because I cannot help seeing it. Of course, he is not on guard

with me. He is very prudent before the generality of people. I am so awfully sorry for him."

"Do not say anything more." So Val desisted.

Arrived at the Lodge, they found Lady Stapylton in the drawing-room, and apparently brighter. She repeated the tidings of Brown's return, and also asked Margaret to stay to dinner. But that young lady was steady, and soon took her leave, returning to sit knitting beside her aunt in absolute silence for the whole evening, till that lady declared to her maid that if Miss Neville often had the sulks in that way she should really end in a lunatic asylum.

This was a terrible time to Margaret; she felt as if on the edge of a precipice; yet dared not grasp the means of salvation. She scarcely knew how time went; she was aching to see the man who would be out of her ken forever, perhaps to-morrow, and to put a climax to her state of pain and confusion, the day before he was to return to London, on coming from a solitary stroll in the avenue of lime trees, she found a card, "Lieutenant H. Brown." P. P. C.

It was all over then—she was left, and in a way rejected. It was too much to bear.

The September evening was beginning to draw in, but she must speak to someone or her heart would break. She caught up a wrap and set forth on foot to the Lodge, supposing that Brown had gone back to barracks, having dined the day previously with the Stapyltons. By the short cut, the distance was not much more than a mile and a half, and Margaret went swiftly.

Hoping to find Val alone, she turned from the little

wicket gate which admitted to the grounds, across the grass to the window of a small morning or writing-room which opened on the lawn, and was appropriated by Valerie for what she termed her profound studies.

It had been a fine day but crisp, and rather cold for the time of the year. A wood fire was burning brightly on the hearth though the door-like window stood open. Through it, to her surprise, her joy, her tremulous terror at being thus suddenly brought face to face with the crucial moment of her fate, she saw by the firelight which played upon his face, which was turned sideways, a well-known figure—Hugh Brown sat at Valerie's writing-table, and held in his hand a photograph at which he was gazing. Margaret knew that a photograph of herself usually stood on the table. Could it be hers on which his eyes were so intently fixed? She must know! How stern, how unhappy he looked. Was she to lose Heaven for herself and him for a punctilio? Yet how dared she say to him what she felt? The next instant he raised the picture to his lips and kissed it repeatedly. Then Margaret took courage and stepped through the window. Even then Brown did not perceive her till she passed between him and the firelight; then she perceived it was her own likeness which he held, and he started up, exclaiming in the bewilderment of the moment "Margaret!"

"Mr. Brown!" she said almost in a whisper, while she grew very white and trembled from head to foot. "Why—why do you kiss my picture?"

"My God! you saw me?" You know, then, how mad I am. Can you forgive——"

"I am not at all angry," she interrupted softly, her color coming back slowly.

"You are too divinely good," stammered Brown, scarcely knowing what he said. "You must know I would never willingly have obtruded my feelings on your notice. I am a weak fool, but I could not help myself."

"Did you try?" she asked, a smile stealing into her eyes.

"No," said Brown, feeling that he might, that he must, relieve his heart by open confession. "I threw myself headlong into the infinite delight, the unspeakable sorrow of loving you. Be the cost what it may I can never forget it."

"Why is it sad to love me?" The tone of her voice was a caress.

"Because I must leave you. I can never hope to call you mine; I am no match for you—you must not think of me."

"Why?" she asked, then covering her face with her hands, she exclaimed, "Hugh, you will not understand me!"

Then the truth burst upon him, and he lost his head—all his fine resolutions, his determination that never would he make the smallest attempt to win her—melted away in the white heat of his passionate delight.

"Great heavens! Is it possible that you give me a thought! That I am more than a mere passing acquaintance to you, Margaret?" She put out a hand timidly towards him, and the next moment was wrapped in an almost painfully close embrace. Could this be the quiet, self-contained man who seemed so

thoroughly master of himself, this lover who had cast all restraint to the winds—whose warm lips clung so greedily to her sweet mouth! And he could hardly believe it was the unapproachable Margaret Neville who leant against him so unresistingly—whose slight form trembled in his arms.

"But you must not love me, my queen!" he exclaimed at last, relaxing his hold and bending his head, to look into her eyes. "It will only give you trouble and vexation. I dare not ask you to love me."

"You would rather I did not, Hugh?"

"What a question to ask! Why, to remember you loved me for one day—is enough to sanctify the rest of my life."

"Yet you would not care to have that holy influence purging all of it?" she asked, drawing gently away from him, smiling archly with downcast eyes.

"Margaret, my love, my soul—I may call you so for this once. You cannot mislead me—I love you too deeply to risk your regretting hereafter that I hurried you into an unequal match. What have you seen of the world—your own world of men and women? You ought to wed with some distinguished man in your own position—who would have something to give as well as take. You do not know the depth, the width of the gulf which separates us—you do not know what charm you may not find in some man of your own station. Dare I step in to spoil your life to alienate you from your friends and relatives, who would look on me as an unprincipled fortune-hunter? No. I shall never be so selfish as to hurry you into such imprudence."

"You do not seem to be at all in a hurry, Hugh," smiling in an arch and distracting way. "And do not flatter yourself that I am. It will be nearly three years before I am of age. Is that long enough to suit you? I do not want to fight the Lord Chancellor (if he showed fight) or quarrel with my aunt; but—but, if you think you could care for me for three long years until I am twenty-one—I need ask no one's consent."

"Three years! What an eternity!"

"It would be better than not being engaged at all, Hugh."

"You must never engage yourself to me, my beloved!"

"Then mine are to be among the 'rejected addresses?'"

"Margaret!"

"You do not understand me, Hugh. Where could I find any one better or truer or more distinguished than yourself? You will be a great general yet—Sir Robert says so. Why will you deny me the pleasure and honor of walking with you hand in hand up the first rugged steps of your way? Ah! Hugh, is it chivalrous to let me force myself upon a reluctant——" Before she could finish he stopped her mouth with very unanswerable arguments.

"We must be reasonable," said Margaret sagely. "If you care for me, if you want to be happy and to make me happy, we must decide now. Do not make yourself and me wretched because you are too proud to put yourself under an imaginary obligation. Don't you think you owe me something?"

"Owe you? The devotion of a life! Why, Mar-

garet, you are in tears—why?”—drawing her to sit beside him on a sofa by the fire.

“I do not know—I cannot tell,” she returned, overcome by the new, strong emotions which had shaken her in the last hour. “But I am so glad—and yet so grieved at the nearness of our parting, that I seem to have lost all self-control.”

“I hate to think I have cost you a tear. When I am gone, might it not be a comfort to you to confide in Lady Stapylton? If it would save you any—anything, my sweetest, I will tell her, though, in truth, I would rather not entrust our secret to anyone.”

“Why? Oh! of course, I do not want to battle with all my people; but why are you so anxious for secrecy?”

“You are so young, Margaret—you will, in the next two or three years, meet so many better and more taking men than myself, that I dare not count on your constancy; and should you change, I do not wish it to be in the power of any living creature to reproach you, as I never will. I dare not take advantage of your girlish generosity, my sweet, my pearl!”

“I am not a mere school-girl, Hugh. I believe I am womanly for my years—and where is my generosity? Exchange is neither robbery nor generosity. You have given me your heart, and I—I have given you mine; as for my lands and money, they are an accident which does not touch our real quality.”

“In real life, my queen, they are enormously powerful factors.”

“Listen!” interrupted Margaret. “I hear wheels.”

“It must be Lady Stapylton returning. I dine

here; will you not stay? We may not be able to speak to each other—but, at least, I shall see you. Oh, girl that I love!"

"Yes, I will—I will, if I am asked," she returned; as he drew her close to him, he felt how she trembled. "And, Hugh!—how strange it seems to call you Hugh—I will tell Lady Stapylton myself; I wish her to know. She is good and wise, and so fond of you. Come into the hall to meet them. I suppose Valerie is with her mother?"

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN the carriage drew up, Valerie sprang out to greet her friend.

"So sorry we were not back sooner. I hope you amused each other? As we were in that direction, mother wished to call at the Court, and when I found you had come over here I asked for Gibbs, and made her put up a change of raiment for you. Mr. Brown is giving us his last day in Blankfordshire. I am so glad you came over. The General is to bring back Dr. O'Grady with him. Oh! you need not worry yourself. I have settled everything with Lady Hazelhurst. How cross she is." While Valerie rattled out this speech, Brown had assisted Lady Stapylton to alight, and she now welcomed Margaret warmly.

After an exchange of commonplaces, they went to their respective rooms.

"What is the matter with Mr. Brown?" asked Val, as she accompanied her friend to her apartment to see that all was in order. "He looks inspired."

"Do you think so?" said Margaret, stooping to pick up her handkerchief which she had dropped.

"Make haste, dear Marge, and dress—I hear the General's voice. He is talking to Dr. O'Grady, and you know punctuality is the god of his idolatry."

"What dress have you brought me?" asked Margaret anxiously.

"Your maid packed up your things. I did not venture to interfere. But all your frocks become you, Marge."

"I am not so sure. Will you ask your Susan to do my hair? That is a thing I cannot manage."

It was in vain that Hugh strove to steady his nerves. To take a rational view of the situation—every throb of his pulse—and they came strong and fast—seemed to say "She loves me. She loves me." Sometimes in a whisper—sometimes in trumpet tones.

He had arranged to leave next day by a train which would take him up to town in time for dinner, as he had an appointment to keep with General Preston on the one following; but now he resolved to take the last train, which reached town at six A. M., and so secure a whole afternoon—the last perhaps he should ever spend with Margaret. Perhaps she would walk with him through the woods back to Caresford. What was there about him that so dainty and delicate a demoiselle of high degree should love him? And she did. She loved him well. The love-light in her great, soft, hazel eyes, the indescribable tenderness of her lightest touch, her tremulous yielding to his passionate caresses. Ah! though he was but a soldier of fortune, risen from the ranks, he was sweet Margaret Neville's lord and master. She could not, or would not, say him nay. But she was his queen, too—most tenderly revered, whose hand he felt scarcely worthy to kiss, in spite of the consciousness of his power over her. He felt intoxicated by the wild exultation which filled his heart, that made him forget there was any to-morrow. No, he would not think of the years of uncertainty which lay between

him and the possible moment of ecstasy when he could call her "wife." It was not often given to a man to taste such joy as his—and he would drink the divine draught to the last drop.

The little party had all assembled, save Margaret, when Hugh entered the drawing-room.

She came in noiselessly a minute or two afterwards, wearing a perfectly simple, untrimmed dress of crimson velvet admirably cut and suiting her rich brunette coloring. A single row of fine pearls was round her throat. To Brown she seemed most gloriously appareled. The delicate outlines of her slender figure showed well in her close fitting corsage and straight, plain skirt. She seemed not to notice him, but shook hands with the General and O'Grady.

Dinner was announced almost immediately, and of course, Margaret went in with Sir Robert, and O'Grady took Lady Stapylton.

Everyone was talkative, being more or less excited about Brown's appointment. The General knew something of the district where the new levies were to be raised, having shot tigers there in the days of yore, and had much to say about the country and the people. Lady Stapylton was thankful that their friend would be in a comparatively healthy region. Val inquired as to the language spoken and the races to be found there. Margaret was very still and silent, and O'Grady deplored the loss of his chum.

"Faith, he'll be a real loss to me, Miss Neville. Not that he appreciated my merits as he ought—not by any means. It was O'Grady, you gossiping old sinner! O'Grady, you murdering saw-bones! Why don't you

put yourself on short commons, O'Grady; you'll not be able to mount that unfortunate pony of yours soon! Those are the endearing terms in which he addressed his preserver.

"I deny it all!" cried Brown, laughing; "at times I felt it right to rebuke your favorite vices. But, doctor, I will say that I shall not soon look upon your like again."

"Begad you are right there! Is it sorrow that's bringing you to a knowledge of the truth?"

"Oh, Mr. Brown doesn't sorrow at all," said Valerie. "He is delighted to be off to fresh fields of—let us say, of glory."

"Amen!" returned the doctor. "You're right. Just look at the eyes of him. Something has struck fire to every electric light in the chamber of his soul, and he cannot hide the blaze. What's the illumination for, my boy?"

"Who knows—perhaps because my soul recognizes the appearance of its sovereign."

"Which is ambition," put in Margaret softly, but very distinctly.

"Yes, Miss Neville, the highest ambition a man could have."

Valerie glanced keenly from one to the other and smiled. Her mother looked at them and sighed.

"You call the soul 'it,' Mr. Brown," said Val.

"I think the soul is generally considered feminine. I don't see how my soul could be considered feminine, but I should certainly hesitate to say 'he' in speaking of it.

"I believe those terrible old gentlemen, the Fathers

of the Church, considered that angels were always masculine," said Margaret.

"If all they have to offer us in Heaven is a collection of well-preserved choir-boys, singing and playing on their harps—faith! I'd be inclined to try the other place," said the doctor.

"I'm not surprised that Brown is exhilarated," said Sir Robert. "He has got a splendid start, and I will say he deserves it. But you'll have a lot of hard work, Brown, you'll be in the saddle pretty well all day. Your first care will be to secure a couple of good mounts. There was a fellow in Bombay, Tom Law, who knew where to find the very kind of animal you wanted, whatever it might be—provided you'd give the price."

Then the talk turned on horses, and flowed in that channel for some minutes till the railway whistle diverted it.

"How near that seems," said O'Grady.

"It is really less than half a mile off," returned Lady Stapylton, "but the wind is setting this way."

"You take the midday train to-morrow, don't you?" said the General, addressing Brown.

"I did intend to do so, but I think the midnight one will do as well. I shall be in ample time for my appointment with General Preston on Thursday."

The ladies then left the table, but the separation was very short. Then came music, and Lady Stapylton made Brown sing all the old favorites. Valerie played his accompaniments on the violin, and her mother gave them some delightful ballads and Volkslieder. Then the doctor, whose duties would not let him remain for the night, took his leave.

"Must you return to the Court to-morrow?" whispered Brown to Margaret—while the General was saying some last words to O'Grady in a loud tone, and laughing at his own wit.

"Yes, Val promised for me."

"If it is fine—will you walk—do walk, and let me come with you. I must speak to you alone. There is only one day of leave before me." He caught her hand unseen in the dim corner behind the piano.

"Yes," she said, low and soft, "and we have so much to say. I will not go till after luncheon."

Brown pressed her hand to his heart for a second, and went to speak to Lady Stapylton, who called him.

The little party sat talking till nearly midnight before they separated. Val hesitated at Margaret's door, and then went in with her.

"Marge—dear Marge! I see that you and Brown, V. C. understand each other. Are you not preparing trouble and pain for yourself?"

"Or, perhaps, joy and peace and all good things."

"Then I am right. But, dear, think, you cannot keep him now and spoil his career! And a long engagement is sure to bristle with miseries and misunderstandings, especially when half the world will be between you. Margaret, it is too, too foolish. Oh! how sorry I am for Hugh Brown. He is such a fine fellow—so high-minded and straightforward, and——"

"Why are you not sorry for me, Val?" cried Margaret, suddenly throwing her arms round Val's neck and bursting into tears. "I know it is unwise both for him and for me, but how can I help myself? It seems

like mere school-girl nonsense to say so, but indeed he is my fate. Don't you feel for me, too, Val?"

"I do indeed—but you have many compensations, Marge, while he has nothing—only you."

"Do you think I cannot be constant, Val? Do you not believe that the man I love will not be all in all to me? I am not worldly. I am as proud of Hugh Brown's love as if he were a crown prince. He is far above me. To be his wife will make me a better woman—and, oh, so infinitely happy. I thought you had a better opinion of me, Val!"

"So I have. I believe you to be as good as gold and as true as steel—but you will have an awful time of worry and opposition and every possible temptation to inconstancy. I would not let any of your people know a word about it if I were you, Marge dear."

"I certainly will not. Aunt Hazelhurst is not bad but she is not my mother. I am entitled to keep my own counsel."

"Yes—you are indeed. Marge, why don't you confess your sins to my mother? She would keep your secret religiously—and she is so wise, so kind, to say nothing of her sincere liking for Hugh Brown. Yes, do tell her."

"I think I may, Val, but not just now. I am so driven to and fro between pain and pleasure I scarcely know what I am doing or saying. And to-morrow he will leave us—me, perhaps forever." Margaret clung closely to her friend and sobbed bitterly.

"Yes, it is very hard to part just as you come to understand each other," exclaimed Val, and proceeded to reason with and soothe the weeping girl.

"I must see him again and alone, Val," she said. "There is so much to say."

"So you shall, dear. Leave it to me. I'll manage," replied Val, consolingly. "And now you must go to bed, you are quite worn out and will look a perfect ghost in the morning."

This argument seemed to have decided weight with Margaret. Valerie therefore summoned her maid, who soon let down and brushed Miss Neville's long nut-brown tresses, and Val having "tucked her up" and lit a night-light, kissed her lovingly and left her to sleep if she could.

How strange it was to wake next morning and remember she was betrothed to Hugh Brown. That she had solemnly promised herself to him. That she was her own no longer, and then to go down-stairs to meet him face to face. She hurried through her dressing in the hope of exchanging a word with him before the rest appeared. And anticipation did not deceive her; as she passed a projecting window on the staircase she saw him on the lawn speaking to Val's favorite collie just in front of the dining-room window.

She turned into that apartment, which was empty, and was immediately joined by her lover.

"Margaret, I have been awake for hours, burning for a sight of—for the sound of your voice. My sweetheart! you are pale and heavy-eyed. You have not slept?"

"I have slept, but it was long before sleep came."

"I fear I have so far brought you more sorrow than joy, my darling. It seems almost audacity to address you so familiarly, and yet how naturally the words come to my lips. And you love me, Margaret?"

"Enough to make parting almost too bitter!"

"It will be fine and dry to-day, thank God, so you will walk home with me."

Before she could reply Sir Robert was heard calling for his right-hand man—the butler and valet—so the lovers were at a respectful distance from each other when he entered the room with a cheery greeting to his guests.

An hour after came the Colonel's groom with a note inviting Sir Robert to dine at the mess that evening as O'Grady had told them that Brown had postponed his departure till the last train, and they were going to give him a farewell entertainment. Sir Robert went off to answer this, and being alone with Margaret, Brown exclaimed, "I wish to heaven they would leave me alone. I shall have to speechify with my head in a whirl, and my heart—you know what state my heart will be in after tearing myself from you. Lady Stapylton, too, has asked me to go and talk to her before luncheon—I am supposed to leave immediately after—and I must go to her, she has been so amazingly kind to me. Yet I feel that my presence sometimes gives her pain—keen pain. Margaret, my queen, will you allow me to tell her that I have dared to tell you how I love you."

"Or that I have been bold enough to draw that confession from you," interrupted Margaret with smiling eyes.

"I betrayed myself first. Indeed, I must have often betrayed myself. But Margaret, may I confide in Lady Stapylton?" She thought a moment, and then exclaimed:

"Yes, if you wish it. I am sure you are wiser than

I am; I will be guided by you. I wish, oh, how I wish you could be always near to advise me."

"You will feel stronger every day, Margaret, and better able to lean upon yourself. You will start immediately after luncheon. How intolerably far off that moment seems."

"Mr. Brown," said Valerie, coming into the room. "Mother says will you pay her your farewell visit now?" And Brown went immediately.

"Do you know, Margaret, that mother is quite upset about Mr. Brown's departure. Yet she keeps saying, it is so much better for him to go away—far away. There is no place for him here. I think he will make a very good place for himself. I do wish you would let me tell mother you have promised to marry Hugh Brown?"

"As Hugh has the same wish, Val, I have agreed to his confiding our story to her, and now I am glad I did. It will be a comfort to speak of him with you both. And she will not be angry with either of us."

"No—perhaps not—but she will think you unwise."

When Hugh joined them at luncheon, Margaret could see that he had been much moved. But as the time for setting out on their walk to the Court drew near, he brightened up.

"I am going to see the gardener's little boy, who has been very ill—and so will go with you as far as his cottage," said Valerie, when they rose from table. Margaret knew that she meant to prevent the appearance of the young *châtelaine* of Caresford walking away *tête-à-tête* with Brown.

At last they were off. In a few minutes Valerie stopped at the cottage, which was on the edge of a common intervening between the General's little property and the Caresford lands. Then they were free—Margaret and her lover—to speak out their whole hearts to each other. Their steps grew slower and slower, and Hugh rapidly sketched the story of his life for her information, eagerly watching her speaking face to see what impression it produced. And he could soon tell that her love for him—her trust in, and respect for him were untouched.

The reader need not dread the infliction of a long lovers' duologue, with its tautology and endless recollections of small incidents, to them of supreme importance. Anyone with average human feeling can imagine it all. There was a grave intensity in Hugh's tone, a passionate earnestness in all he said which deeply impressed upon Margaret that, in accepting his love, she took upon herself a great responsibility, even while, he insisted, with unselfish generosity, that she must never consider herself bound to him an hour after she felt her engagement a chain that chafed.

"And you must be equally free, Hugh," she said smiling. "It would be unfair otherwise."

"Oh, I shall ask for my freedom when I want it," he said rather grimly. "Meantime, are you going to write to me, sweetheart? I may have that comfort."

"Yes—yes, of course. Do you not think I shall want your letters, Hugh? You must write me long, long ones—about everything you do and think and wish and hope for."

They had now reached the avenue of lime trees and

had sat down on the grassy bank beside the big stem of one of them where they might be long unobserved by any passers-by.

"Your letters will be a foretaste of heaven to me Margaret. Meanwhile will you wear this for my sake?" He drew from his waistcoat pocket a ring and asked her to take off her glove, when he placed upon her engagement finger an old-fashioned brilliant ring of the Marquise shape. "Stay, dear!" he exclaimed "I must show you the inscription inside. He withdrew the ring, and taking it from him she read the words "*sempre l'istessa*."

"It is a curious ring and a beautiful one. I wish you had not drawn it off again, Hugh; it is not a good omen."

"Do not trouble yourself on that score, sweetheart, nothing I give you can bring you evil. Margaret, I have worn that ring round my neck since I was about eighteen. It was left for me by my mother when she left me."

"Do not speak of her, Hugh. I could never forgive her desertion of you."

"God only knows what straits she may have been in!"

"No, nothing can excuse it, Hugh dear. And now you must wear this for my sake," she resumed. "It is the only suitable thing I have to give you. The seal ring of my late uncle—maybe the omen that you are to rule in his place. Hugh, dear, it must be growing late—we must go on to the house."

"Oh, God! how shall I say good-by?" he exclaimed as if to himself. They rose and slowly paced along

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till they came very near the semicircular lawn on which the avenue debouched.

"You had better not come any further," said Margaret. "I hate to conceal my engagement with you, but I cannot face the irritation of explaining to my aunt now—and as you must go away it would do us no good. And you say Lady Stapylton was very kind?"

"Infinitely kind and sympathetic. You may trust her, I am sure. What! no further? Must I stop here?"

"I am afraid you must."

"One last kiss, my darling—my queen—my all! A long kiss—as long as—I like!"

"I love you, I shall always love you," murmured Margaret brokenly, throwing herself into his arms and giving herself to the long impassioned embrace in which he wrapped her while she felt the wild throbbing of his heart against her breast. At last he released her, and gazed almost alarmed at her pallid face, her quivering lips, her sweet woful eyes. Again and again he repeated his farewell kiss till she took courage to dismiss him. "You must go now, let us not look at each other again—or we shall not be able to part. Go—my dear love!"

"God be with you, sweetheart!"

To Margaret's relief Lady Hazelhurst was out, so she escaped to her room and had time to compose herself before appearing in the dining-room.

Fortunately, the county member and his wife, with Mr. and Mrs. Harrington Everard, and a very High Church curate of pronounced Conservative proclivities,

dined at the Court that day, and the buzz of political talk diverted attention from her pale, wan face and absent manner.

Never through all the coming years could Margaret forget the night which succeeded. The long, long wakeful hours—the desperate desire to see his face once more. The sweet memory of his tenderness. The awful vista of three long years of separation. All this and more racked and tortured her.

At last, worn out with mental anguish, she dropped asleep—a heavy sleep, which lasted long after day-break.

When Margaret entered the breakfast room next morning, she was much later than usual, and felt some surprise at finding her extremely conventional aunt in animated conversation with the stately, serene butler.

"Yes, my lady," he was saying, "if it wasn't for stopping at Rendelsham, to have the wheel repaired, instead of shoving in another carriage, the train would not have been behind-hand, and the accident would not have occurred."

"What accident?" asked Margaret, carelessly.

"Oh, a dreadful collision at the tunnel junction," exclaimed Lady Hazelhurst. "The up train ran into a luggage-train, and all smashed up. Very few passengers were hurt, fortunately; but that poor Mr. Brown, who has just had a very good appointment in India, was either dangerously hurt or killed, and carried into the Lodge, which is, you know quite near."

CHAPTER XXI.

MARGARET stood for a moment as if turned to stone, gazing at her aunt without seeing her, then as the butler moved to leave the room she suddenly came to life. "Stay," she cried, "tell the coachman to bring round the brougham immediately, as soon as ever he can. I shall be ready in five minutes."

There was a ring of command in her tone that made itself felt. The man went rapidly away, and Lady Hazelhurst, after a moment of astonished silence, exclaimed :

"Why, Margaret, what in the world are you going to the Lodge for? You cannot help them, you can only be in the way."

Margaret, who was half-way to the door, stopped, turned, and looked full at Lady Hazelhurst with awe-struck eyes, said : "Hugh Brown is my affianced husband, I am going to help him, if he still lives ; to look upon him if he is dead."

"Your affianced husband," shrieked her aunt. "Oh, you dreadful, deceitful girl." But Margaret did not heed her, before the words were fully uttered, Margaret was in the hall. Lady Hazelhurst dropped into her chair, and resting her elbows on the table, supported her chin in her hands, whilst she thought in a confused way of the wrath of the guardians, their indignation against

herself, of the fury of the Uppingshams, mother and sons, of the chatter of society. Almost unconsciously she prayed that Brown might be dead. It would save so much trouble! Never, no never, could she forgive Margaret. There was something low about the girl; yet her descent on both sides was irreproachable. Nevilles and Courtneys united ought to produce something better than deceit and low tastes. What was she to do? With whom could she consult—Rupert Manvers? Why, she had led him to look on Margaret as his own property, and he would be as angry with her as any one else. How ungrateful, how worthless Margaret was!

Then everything swam before her eyes in formless confusion, till the sound of wheels on the gravel outside stung her to something like decision, and she went out into the hall as Margaret descended the stair.

"Margaret! I forbid you to leave the house—you are under my charge, and I will not allow you to—to—destroy yourself in this way—you must not go—I—I command you!"

"I know you are very angry, and I am sorry to vex you, Aunt Harriet, but I am obeying a stronger command than yours; no one in the world could stop me, save by main force. I may return to-day or to-morrow—or—or don't count on anything. We will come to an understanding later." She was down the steps and in the carriage before Lady Hazelhurst could reply.

That unhappy woman wrung her hands, and returning to the breakfast-room, mechanically poured herself out a cup of tea, into which she recklessly piled lumps of sugar. "The servants will suspect all sorts of things," she thought, "and busy themselves putting two and

two together. Oh, yes! and make five or six out of it. What shall I do?"

While Lady Hazelhurst repeated this fruitless query, Margaret drove rapidly towards Eden Lodge in a state of nervous tension which made her deaf and blind to everything save the dominant idea that Hugh was crushed, perhaps dying, and the reiterated prayer that God would spare him, even though bruised and maimed, that she might watch over and tend him, and make life sweet to him—anything—anything rather than let him slip from her forever into the unknown.

When she reached the Lodge, she saw that the gravel sweep was deeply marked by hoofs and wheels—the door stood open as usual, and before it a dogcart which Margaret recognized as belonging to the chief medical man in Castletown. Just inside the entrance stood Valerie in outdoor dress—speaking eagerly to a man in groom's livery.

She gave a little cry when she saw Margaret, and then ran to meet her.

"Oh, Margaret—dear Margaret, I was only waiting for the report of the doctors to go over and tell you the terrible tidings. I did not think they would reach you so soon."

"He is alive then?" cried Margaret, throwing herself in her arms. "Is there any hope—tell me all."

"Come into the drawing-room," and Val led the way there.

"Dr. O'Grady says he may recover, but he has not shown any signs of consciousness since he was carried in here about one o'clock this morning. Imagine, my father and nearly all the men who dined at mess went

to see him off at the station ; the train was late, and not a quarter of an hour after they bid him good-by it dashed into a luggage-train, which was coming up at a good speed. Hugh Brown was in the first carriage, which was all smashed to pieces ; that he is alive is a perfect miracle. The signalman at the junction telegraphed for help, and somehow my father and some of the others heard of the smash and went down with the relief party, so the General had him brought here, poor Mr. Brown, I mean."

"May I see him when the doctors have gone?" asked Margaret, with quivering lips.

"Do not ask, dear," said Val soothingly, "you could do him no good, and, poor fellow, he is dreadfully bruised and battered. Mother was there at first till we had a nurse from the Institute in Castletown ; my father went himself for Dr. Slade, and brought back the nurse with him. My mother says Mr. Brown is an awful sight, and he would not recognize you in the least ; his head has been dreadfully hurt. Margaret, dear, don't look in such terrible despair. Doctor O'Grady thinks the case by no means hopeless."

"Yes, but he is such a sanguine, surface sort of man."

"He is a very clever doctor, and saved Hugh Brown's life before, remember."

The injured man, in fact, was a gruesome sight, a large piece of his scalp was torn back and his arm broken ; the severe blow on his head rendered him quite insensible, the shock to the nervous system making him icy cold and deathlike.

Indeed, Lady Staphylton thought the grave would soon close upon her secret and its victim. Her mental

agony was great, but her intense anxiety that that which had acquired such profound importance in her eyes should be saved, that her neglected son should live and prosper and enjoy—gave her new strength, new power over herself. The courage and steadiness with which she performed the duties of a nurse, shrinking from no distressing detail, excited the surprise and admiration of O'Grady.

"It seems to me, my dear lady, that your perfect cure required a human sacrifice," he said to her as they paused for a moment from their labors. "Begad! you're the better man of the two. Now I know you would like another opinion, so don't hesitate to send for Doctor Slade. He is a first-rate man, and two heads are better than one; send for him, and fetch a nurse when you are about it. This will be a long job, and you will collapse presently."

"But, Doctor, he looks so like death."

"Maybe so, but he's alive all the same, as you'll find out when his senses come back, and he takes the turn for fever; meantime let us have more hot salt to his feet. You had better get his servant over here from the barracks. If delirium sets in you'll want all the help you can have; for all he was so gentle and quiet, poor Brown is a very powerful man."

The weary hours went by, so fast, so slow, and still Hugh lay like death, temporarily dead in fact, while the whole household waited the result in breathless anxiety.

Margaret imperiously put aside any suggestion of returning to the Court. She stayed on at the Lodge, sometimes pacing slowly to and fro the drawing-room, sometimes sitting at the table on which her own photo-

graph stood—the photograph to which she owed her understanding with her lover, her face in her hands, her elbows on the table. Sometimes Lady Stapylton stole away from the sick-room, where she spent most of her time, to comfort the despairing girl. But in O'Grady she found her greatest support. Even when the terrible fever, which as he foretold, succeeded the deathlike insensibility, and taxed all his care and skill, he presented a hopeful, cheerful aspect. The Doctor seemed another man to Margaret, concentrated, authoritative, spare of speech, and self-reliant.

So he pulled his patient through the fever, and then came a spell of utter exhaustion, requiring the closest watching.

Before this stage was reached, Margaret returned to her aunt; her days were chiefly spent at the lodge, and a mounted messenger was despatched early each morning with a report as to how the patient had passed the night.

This was a source of bitter vexation to Lady Hazelhurst. Why, every clown in the county would know that Margaret Neville, of Caresford, was, in a sense, groveling at the feet of an utter nobody—a common soldier in point of fact. She would be the talk of all England, all social England! What would the Duchess say! How disgusted the Duke would be!

It was still a trying time, even when Hugh was pronounced out of danger. His first words when he found his arm was broken were, "Not my sword arm!" His feverish anxiety lest he should lose the appointment which opened a vista of success helped also to retard his recovery.

At last came the supreme moment when Margaret

was allowed to visit him—she preserved an admirable composure; she had too much at stake not to hold fast to her self-control. Hugh was too weak to do more than to whisper a word or two at long intervals. He lay quite still, his thin, wasted hands clasped on one of hers, gazing on her sweet, grave, pale face with a look of ineffable content.

To look at him in this low estate of helpless weakness filled her heart with a passion of tenderness and pitying love.

She, too, said but little, and Doctor O'Grady sat with Lady Stapylton in her own room, which was close by, watch in hand, ready to cut short the interview at the appointed moment.

"You have committed yourself too completely, my love, my sweetheart," murmured Hugh, as she kissed his brow softly before leaving him. "You are too generous." Her only reply was a radiant smile, and a slight shake of the head.

After this, Margaret paid a visit every day to the invalid, its length being carefully prescribed by the doctor, for the joy of having her sitting beside him, her hand generally in his, was almost too much for his shaken nerves.

At first the Viscountess declared war to the knife against Lady Stapylton, by whose machinations she protested Margaret had been entrapped into such a disgraceful entanglement. Never would she set foot in Eden Lodge again, she had always felt a repugnance to that woman, which ought to have been a warning to her.

This state of affairs was the source of serious distress.

to Lady Stapylton; she did not like to pose before her friends and neighbors as a designing matchmaker. Moreover, a breach such as this would put difficulties in the way of that close intercourse between Val and Margaret, which was so important an addition to her daughter's pleasure and happiness. She was at her wits' end how to patch up a peace, or even a truce, till poor Brown was well enough to start for India, as his appointment had been held open for him until at least it could be ascertained how soon he could travel.

Valerie shared her mother's uneasiness, and they held many conversations about the *embrouillement*.

That young lady was busy writing some letters for the General, who often employed her as his secretary, one fine crisp October morning, when the door of her father's sitting-room, where she was at work, opened abruptly to admit Jack Everard.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Stapylton, they told me the General was here—and, having the freedom of the house, I ventured to look for him myself."

"You need not apologize, Mr. Everard, I wanted to see you very much. I think you might help me and mother," exclaimed Valerie, stretching out her hand to him.

"Help you! Yes, of course I am ready to do anything in the world," cried Everard, eagerly, and he drew a chair to the opposite side of the table, and, resting his arms on it, looked all attention.

"I suppose you know how angry Lady Hazelhurst is with mother, indeed, with all of us?"

"Well, it isn't a dead secret; but it's rather unreasonable."

"Yes, of course, I think so."

"So do I, Miss Stapylton, and Brown didn't want any help. For my part, I saw that he was a gone coon long ago. Of course they must be rather annoyed, on the Neville side, I mean. They do not know, as you and I do, what a nice fellow Brown is, but though I am not much in favor of these unequal marriages myself, I fancy this one may be a success. Margaret Neville is such a trump, too, quite unlike the ordinary run of girls."

"She is, indeed. I have been thinking that you are such friends with Lady Hazellhurst you might go and see her, and mention how distressed we are, and how unjustly she suspects my mother. Then you might suggest that it is perfectly useless to oppose Margaret, that she had better trust to time, and absence. Ah! they are potent allies in such a case! Probably in another month Mr. Brown may be able to leave England."

"Yes, I will ride over and have a talk with the Viscountess, but I am an awkward fellow in diplomacy. There has been an awful blow-up. Manvers has got leave on account of urgent private affairs. He made rather too sure of our little Blankfordshire heiress."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Everard, you know it would make a great difference in my life if there were difficulties put in the way of my everyday intercourse with Margaret."

"Yes, I am aware you are no end chums. You may depend on my doing my level best—and——"

Here the entrance of Lady Stapylton cut him short.

"Ah, Mr. Everard, I did not know you were here—Sir Robert is out——"

"Yes, mother, and I'm improving the occasion by engaging Mr. Everard to be our advocate with Lady Hazelhurst."

"It is asking rather too much, dear," said Lady Stapylton.

"Not at all," he returned, "I am only too glad to do your bidding."

"Of course," said Lady Stapylton, "one must make allowance for caste prejudices; Lady Hazelhurst's objections are natural enough. In most similar cases, I should sympathize with her. Hugh Brown is a very exceptional man, and she is scarcely aware of it."

"Just so," replied Everard, "she is a very exclusive sort of aristocrat; gave herself great airs when she came down here first as Mrs. George Neville. I have heard my mother tell some droll stories about her—she was even doubtful if we were fit to associate with. She was down here as a bride when I was christened. That event was made a great function, and she refused to come to it because she was in such deep mourning for her uncle Uppingham, who was just dead then. My mother declares it was because she did not send credentials with her invitation."

He laughed good-humoredly.

"I thought you were about a year and a half younger than Hugh Brown," said Lady Stapylton, reflectively.

"I don't know about that; I know I was born in 1856."

"Fifty-six!" she repeated, gazing with a puzzled ex-

pression at the speaker. "But was not Lord Hazelhurst married in fifty-five?"

"No; he must have been married early in fifty-six, for my birthday is in March."

Lady Stapylton did not reply just at once, and Valerie exclaimed: "Why, Mr. Everard, you are older than I thought, you are quite a respectable age. You ought to have been adding your share of wisdom to the councils of the nation by this time."

"That means you think I have very little, eh, Miss Stapylton? Grant at least that I have enough to hold my tongue."

"Or to speak only when you have something to say, which is very unusual wisdom," returned Valerie, who thought she detected something like wounded feeling in his tone, and of late she had found him so much improved that she felt she might relax the severity of her treatment.

They continued to chaff each other after their usual fashion for a few minutes, during which Lady Stapylton sat silent and seemingly lost in profound thought.

"All this time I have not inquired for Brown," said Everard suddenly.

"He is improving very slowly," returned Lady Stapylton, rousing herself. "Doctor O'Grady does not think he will be able to leave his room for some time yet. I fear Mr. Brown's eagerness to be up and doing retards his recovery. It is altogether most unfortunate. His engagement to Margaret Neville must make him doubly anxious for opportunities to distinguish himself. I am afraid, Mr. Everard, that Sir Robert will not return till dinner-time, he has gone over

to Rendlesham, and his movements are very uncertain."

"Then, Lady Stapylton, I will ride over to the Court and have it out with Lady Hazelhurst. By the way, is Miss Neville here or there?"

"She left us about an hour ago; she comes every day, poor dear child; it is a bad time for her. She has so much at stake. Her anxiety about Mr. Brown is intense, and she feels that every man's hand—no, every woman's hand, is against her! Much as I like Mr. Brown, I am sorry this engagement has taken place. I fear it will bring trouble to both of them."

"No doubt it will, but I think Miss Neville is a trump and Brown is another; still, constancy is a very rare virtue. I am told Miss Neville will not see a soul."

"No, not a creature!" cried Val; "how could she, and you do not know how disagreeable Lady Hazelhurst is."

"Hard lines for her niece. Well, Lady Stapylton, I will say good morning; may I come in to-morrow and report progress?"

"Yes, pray do; come to luncheon, one-thirty."

"Val says you wish to speak to me," said Sir Robert, coming into his wife's dressing room about half an hour before dinner.

"Yes, I do," she returned, desisting from her occupation of pinning a lace lappet on her head, and inspecting the rapidly growing grayness of her still abundant hair.

She turned and slipped her arm through her husband's with a caressing movement.

"Anything bothering you?" he asked, looking down kindly into the deep, sad eyes which were raised to his

"Well, yes, I have had a bit of information to-day that has disturbed me a good deal. I am not disposed to believe it, for I don't fancy Jack Everard is too accurate."

"He is very truthful, I fancy."

"No doubt, in things he is sure of—to-day he spoke from hearsay."

"What did he tell you?"

"That Lady Hazelhurst was married in fifty-six, not in fifty-five."

"Gad! that would make a difference," ejaculated Sir Robert, with a look of surprise.

"You must find out for me, dear. You can ascertain the fact in any peerage. I never dreamed of questioning the date of the marriage; suppose Everard is right?"

"I don't see that it would make much difference to you now, my love; it would do no good to break silence at this time of day. Why open old sores? I suspect you have been living the old evil times over again—that is why you are suffering from nerves and depression and all the rest. Let bygones be bygones, my dear wife."

"You will find out for me, will you not?" she repeated, pressing her face against his arm.

"Yes, if you wish it—we have a peerage in the house, but I am afraid it is rather too new to give us the particulars you want. Did you never think of verifying Neville's statement at the time?"

"Never; such an idea never crossed my mind. Does

a man ever accuse himself falsely? Dear Robert, you are quite wet," feeling his coat-sleeve. "I did not know it was raining."

"It came on a sudden downpour just as I passed Caresford Bridge. I had no overcoat, it was so fine when I left this morning."

"Then pray go and change directly; we are neither of us so young as we used to be, dear, and I am so much more nervous and fidgety than I was; you are more precious to me than even in the old days. Let us say no more about this doubtful date. Of course I have only Jack Everard's word."

"I wish, dear, you would put the whole thing out of your head; it can be of no possible importance now."

He kissed his wife's brow, and left the room.

It had been Lady Stapylton's custom to share the nurse's vigil in the sick-room, remaining with Hugh till two or three in the morning, in spite of her daughter's remonstrances.

Strange as it may seem, it was infinitely sweet to her to keep watch by the bedside of the sufferer. He had grown very dear to her—at times her heart swelled as if it would burst with remorse and shame and sorrow as he gazed at the noble face, pallid and worn with suffering, that lay so still upon the pillow. Where was the tongue that could frame reproaches to match the eloquence and poignancy of those she read in the silence of her helpless charge? Mad as it would be to utter her secret, she burned to confess all to her deserted son, to extract some word of pity from his lips, some generous sentence of absolution, before she went

hence to be no more seen. How base, how cowardly she had been; and she had prospered when better women, who had been true to their love, to its responsibilities, had been engulfed in poverty and utter failure. How plainly she now saw—judging of the past by the light of the present, that had she been brave, had she dared to face her temporary difficulties, how different her life would have been. But she had been false to herself, to the mother instinct which she had trampled upon, urged to this barbarity by selfish regard for her reputation, for personal pride, that now seemed beneath contempt.

This night she came to relieve the nurse earlier than usual, for Sir Robert had demanded hot grog in his bed at an early hour, to preserve him against the effect of his drenching.

"I fancy he is pretty sound, my lady," said the nurse. "He has been desperately restless ever since Miss Neville left to-day. I do think the doctor ought not to let that dear young lady come."

"She is too near, nurse, to be kept away."

"I suppose so, my lady," said nurse, resignedly. "Good night."

Lady Stapylton settled herself in a great chair, and wrapping herself in a soft Indian shawl, closed her eyes, not to sleep, but to think, to battle with her own conscience, to rise for seconds into a mood of courage, and the heroism of atonement, to sink anon into depths of cowardly selfishness.

Meantime, the patient slumbered uneasily, murmuring inarticulately, or sighing deep-drawn sighs, almost moans.

CHAPTER XXII.

How long she sat thus absorbed in reminiscence and anticipation, Lady Stapylton did not know, but it seemed at once no time, yet ages, when a low voice from the bed asked, "Some water."

She rose instantly, and brought him a tumblerful iced.

"Oh! is it you?" he exclaimed, waking more completely. "You ought not to lose your rest for me. You are not strong, but you are too good. Were you my mother you could not nurse me more tenderly."

"Hush! hush! you mustn't talk. You must do your best to get strong."

"Yes, I will try! I cannot lie here much longer." He turned his head away and kept silent for some minutes. Lady Stapylton sat down beside him—her heart aching for the isolation she had inflicted on this son who ought to have been her pride, her joy, her support.

But Hugh was not asleep. "I was awfully done up when nurse settled me for the night—yet I cannot sleep! What o'clock is it?"

"About half-past twelve," consulting her watch.

"Let me speak to you! It will rest me. Silence is wearisome when one cannot sleep."

"Well, speak then—but not much."

"How long does O'Grady really think I must lie here?"

"I imagine he hopes you may get so far as the sofa in the next room on Wednesday or Thursday—but I cannot say he told me so."

"Ah! my dear Lady Stapylton, you are flattering my hopes. Is it not a terrible stroke of bad luck for me to be tied here when I have so strong a motive for action? Perhaps the Horse Guards people will not wait."

"They told Sir Robert they would make no appointment in your place for six weeks."

"And three are gone! I shall never be able to travel in three more!"

"I have no doubt they will give you a longer time still. If you torment yourself, my dear Hugh, you will postpone your recovery indefinitely. Think of nothing but trying to get well."

"Will you draw your chair a little forward? I like to see your face."

The tears forced themselves to his hearer's eyes—he went on.

"Seeing Margaret every day will make it awfully hard to part—and she will feel it too—for she loves me. Is it not astonishing? but she does! How generous she is! How little she thinks of her sweet self—yet she is proud. She is rather a remarkable character—don't you think so?"

"She is a true-hearted, high-minded, intelligent English girl, but, thank God, there are many like her."

"Yes. How good women are! Where should we find men equal to—you, for instance, and Margaret and Miss Stapylton?—so true and unselfish. It makes me desperately angry to hear men sneer at them, and speak

contemptuously of them, when they are so inferior in every way ! But, indeed, Lady Stapylton, I have rarely, if ever, heard men of my own original rank speak in this way. Now I have heard plenty of such talk since I associated with gentlemen."

"You are talking a great deal too much, Hugh. Nurse will be angry with me if I let you."

"It is such a comfort ! Do let me go on a little longer. I never knew that life could know such joy—such exultation as I felt that day before I was smashed up—I felt the equal of kings, because she loved me ! I must have some worth in me or her heart would not have gone out to meet mine—and now I lie here a poor, helpless creature."

"I do not think it so very extraordinary that Margaret should love you ! She could not help seeing that you loved her—and that is very attractive to a woman."

"I tried not to show it. It was too presumptuous."

"Yes, on the whole you hid it very successfully—but there is an electric current between natures that are attracted to each other. You have given her a very charming, curious ring—she showed it to me," said Lady Stapylton, unable to resist approaching a subject which made her quiver with dread, yet attracted her most potently.

"Yes, I was glad to have it to give. Do you know I had worn that round my neck for nearly ten years—I still wear the chain it used to hang on—that was given to me by another dear, good woman—and I shall always keep it for her sake. But the ring ! Ah ! how I hated it once—when I was first told my own story. That ring was left for me when my mother deserted me.

You know—no, you don't know, but I tell you now—I was a poor, deserted waif, taken from charity by a kind soul, a poor woman, in whose house my mother lodged—she fled, and has never been heard of since. When I was told this, it almost broke my heart. I seemed accursed by fate. I would not touch the ring—I hated the woman who had so outraged nature.” He stopped abruptly.

There was profound silence in the dimly-lighted room—without, an autumnal wind sighed solemnly at intervals. She thanked God the semi-darkness hid her face, she could not speak. Involuntarily she laid her hand on his.

“I know you feel for me,” he murmured, and went on in a broken, subdued voice. “Afterwards, when I came to understand life better, I was less hard, though, I am sure the sense of isolation made me stronger, more self-reliant than I should otherwise have been. I began to think that God only knew what straits my mother might not have been in, besides, she had thought of me; she sent money from time to time for my use, and she had evidently trusted to the kindness of my mother by adoption, who was, indeed my mother, so my heart melted, and I took the ring—and in those boyish days I prayed God to forgive her, and forgave her myself.

He stopped again, amazed at the strength with which Lady Stapylton pressed his hand.

“God will bless you for your pity on an erring and unfortunate woman. Have you told your tale to Margaret?”

“Yes, every word.”

“Hear me, Hugh! It may be in my power to do you

a great service. I shall soon know if I can. If it is in my power, I swear to you, before Heaven, I will do it—cost what it may—cost what it may," she reiterated, in a low, solemn tone.

"I am sure you will if you can," he returned, not very deeply impressed, thinking she was excited by her remarkable sympathy with him into some vague promise of renewed exertions on his behalf by Sir Robert.

"Now, you must sleep, or you will not be fit to see Margaret to-morrow. I will give you a composing draught." She fetched and administered it, feeling surprised at her own composure—the sudden strength which had come to her after pledging herself solemnly to do the right thing.

She returned to her chair, and soon perceived from his soft and regular breathing that Brown, either from the relief of opening his mind to her, or the effect of the draught, had fallen into a deep sleep. Lady Stapylton did not close her eyes, though she thought more clearly and calmly. How to deal with the formidable task she had undertaken was an absorbing topic! Every step of her penitential way would be over red-hot plowshares of bitter pain and cruel humiliation. What would be the end thereof? Would they cast her out? Could she blame them if they did?

"I am afraid I overslept myself," said the nurse in a whisper. She had crept in unheard. "Has he had a good night, my lady?"

"He was very restless and talkative for the first part, but he is sleeping peacefully now. I was obliged to

give him a draught," and Lady Stapylton rose, gave nurse a little nod, and glided from the room.

* * * * *

Both Sir Robert and Valerie saw how terribly ill Lady Stapylton looked, but made no observation upon her appearance, knowing how much annoyed she was when her looks were noticed. She was very silent too, but not restless and feverish as she had hitherto been.

When they rose from breakfast Lady Stapylton slipped her arm through her husband's, and walked with him to his study, where he generally spent the first hour of the morning writing letters and an occasional page of his "Reminiscences" which he was slowly compiling.

"You will not forget to find out the date of Lord Hazelhurst's marriage," she said. "I am anxious to know it."

"Oh, yes! Leave it to me. Though why you should trouble about it, I do not know. It can be of no importance now, and though you are not fond of her nobility, the Countess, I am sure you are above wishing to humiliate her!"

"My dear husband, for all the emotion she excites in me, Lady Hazelhurst might not exist."

Sir Robert looked at her earnestly.

"At the risk of vexing you, Irma, I must say your looks alarm me."

"I promise you that when Hugh Brown is himself again and able to leave us, I will go to London and consult any doctor you wish—if," she added in a low voice, "you still care about it."

"Still care about your health! What are you thinking of!"

"Pray, Margaret," asked Lady Stapylton, as that young lady came into the drawing-room to exchange greetings after her diurnal visit to the invalid—"Pray can you tell me the date of your Aunt Lady Hazelhurst's marriage?"

"I do not know the day exactly—but it was early in fifty-six—March or April."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, as to the year—Aunt Harriet is always talking of the hardships of having been mistress of Caresford such a short time. Old Lord Hazelhurst, my great grandfather, her father-in-law, died in fifty-nine. Then she had been three years married, and my father succeeded her husband, who was his uncle, two years after—so she was only two years mistress at the Court—that makes the date of her marriage fifty-six, does it not?"

"I do not seem able to take it in!" said Lady Stapylton faintly. "Generally a marriage in your grade is a grand function, which marks the event, and——"

"Oh, no. Aunt Harriet's was almost a private marriage. Her uncle, Lord Uppingham, had just died, and her mother, Lady Caroline Collingwood, thought herself dying—so it was all done very quietly."

"Ah—indeed!"

"I think Hugh seems so much better to-day, Lady Stapylton. He says you are so wonderfully good to him—in short, you are the most delightful woman in the world."

"Save one, I suppose," said Lady Stapylton, forcing her pale lips to smile.

"Oh! there is no exception. Will you drive back with me?"

"My dear child, Lady Hazelhurst would not let me inside the doors."

"She is very tiresome just now. I am sometimes rather depressed when I think of the three years of warfare which lie before me."

"They will pass swiftly—more swiftly than you can imagine."

"Ah! here is Val! Val, come with me to shop in Castletown; I want fifty things."

"So do I. Why is it that we always want fifty things—when it is not a hundred?"

Still Lady Stapylton was not quite satisfied, and passed a very restless day—part of it in reading to Hugh—part in discussing his state with O'Grady.

At last Sir Robert came into her sitting-room where she sat, weary, and yet unable to rest, some embroidery in her hand, and a pile of bright-colored silks in a basket beside her. He looked flushed and disturbed.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "Everard is right! Hazelhurst did not marry Miss Collingwood till fifty-six—the third of March. The Viscountess is nothing more than Harriet Collingwood now. I speak by Debrett."

"It will kill her to know it—and—how can I live—" She stopped abruptly, and rising, walked twice to and fro distractedly.

"I wouldn't distress myself about it, dear. The old wounds need not be re-opened. Our aristocratic neighbor has no children. Margaret would in any case be the heir—and so——"

Lady Stapylton stopped, and held up her hand impressively. "Wait," she said, "I have yet something

to tell you before I take your advice, for by it I shall be guided."

"Well, then, out with it!" exclaimed the General.

"It is a long story, my dear husband—and I must have an uninterrupted talk with you. Soon we shall be summoned to dinner. No, I cannot begin now—tomorrow—perhaps I had better write the outline. We can discuss it afterwards. I should so much rather write it."

"Written communications are rather formidable, and it will give you a lot of trouble, dear."

"I prefer to write it," repeated Lady Stapylton, as if speaking in a dream.

"Oh, just as you like."

"You see, what with our patient, the doctor, and Margaret perpetually in and out, we are rarely alone together. By the way, the doctor thinks Hugh may be moved into the west bedroom, next his own, for a couple of hours to-morrow."

"That's good news, and I have more: Preston tells me they will certainly give Brown extension of leave at the end of his six weeks. That young fellow will go far, I promise you, my lady."

"I trust he may—especially to do credit to Margaret."

"That is the only thing that bothers me! I'm afraid that engagement will be rather a mill-stone to both of them."

"I hope and expect it will terminate sooner and more happily than you think."

Brown's first distinct step towards restoration was successfully accomplished next day. He was greatly cheered, and began to see the end of his imprisonment.

Nurse, however, exerted her authority, and curtailed Margaret's visit considerably.

The General sat awhile with him, and gave the good news received the previous day. But Lady Stapylton was only with him for a few minutes. Vai, indeed, reported her as writing hard in her own room.

"I do hope mother is writing her life," continued Valerie. "She always promised me she would. She was very much mixed up with politics in 1848, and knew lots of interesting and remarkable people."

The result of her lucubrations shall be given in the next chapter, as they can be more clearly and shortly dealt with in the third person than in the first. Moreover, the General was familiar with much of his wife's history which is unknown to the reader.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IRMA RETZ was the daughter of a Hungarian, and his English wife. Her father was of a noble, but decayed, family, a kindly, generous, unpractical man. Her mother had been a concert-singer, and had done well in her profession. When she met, and fell in love with, the handsome, attractive Istvan Retz, then studying medicine in Paris, he promptly and imprudently married her.

They led a struggling life in Buda-Pesth, and afterwards at Pressburgh, where Istvan Retz died, leaving his widow with a boy and girl of fifteen and fourteen respectively.

How they battled on, heaven only knew. The few aristocrats in the little old town befriended them, for mother and children had the great gift of beauty, and the even greater gift of charm. The boy, Hugh, named after his English grandfather, elected to follow his father's profession. Irma, who developed an exquisite voice, was trained for the Opera. Her mother contrived to take her children to Vienna, where she found a master who undertook to train the young songstress for the possible large payments she could make him in future. Here they worked, and just steered clear of starvation. Yet they were happy days. The warmest affection, the truest sympathy united the trio. Irma's mother never

let her daughter out of her sight ; she knew the charms, the dangers, the temptations of the Bohemian world, especially in beautiful, pleasure-loving Vienna.

The girl, absorbed in her work, succeeded. The boy, a political dreamer, and utterly without grit, was—or threatened to be—a failure.

The mother lived long enough to feel assured that Irma was on the high-road to fortune ; while a certain strength and nobility of nature convinced her the girl was safe in the stronghold of her own pride. The young orphans clung together with increased affection and renewed tenacity. Irma's reputation grew steadily and her engagements multiplied ; she was a favorite in all the towns of Southern Germany. Ultimately Berlin and Paris welcomed her, and she earned what seemed to her at first fabulous sums.

She always returned to Vienna, where her brother loved to dwell, though he often accompanied her on her tours North, South, East, and West, while, unknown to his sister, though not quite unsuspected, he became the dupe of idealists like himself, who had advanced from dreams to the vulgar reality of conspiracies.

Some years of this prosperous life had passed, and as she had little or no taste for show or finery, Irma Retz would have stored up a solid provision against rainy days but for the demands of her brother, who constituted himself a sort of Providence to needy Hungarians and Utopian speculators.

In spite of her generosity to him, she was in very easy circumstances, and at the height of her fame, when the Hon. George Neville, one of the attachés of the British

Embassy, was introduced to her. She only received him because of his nationality, for her private life was exceedingly private; she did not care much for the members of her own profession, and into the society of the higher classes she was not admissible.

George Neville was an ideal specimen of a highly cultivated, traveled Englishman of the world, perhaps one of the most fascinating of social types. Tall, slight, graceful, with a soupçon of delicate health which added to the interest he excited.

His conversation was peculiarly delightful to Irma. There was a tinge of seriousness in it, a tone of equality which raised her intellectually in her own esteem, and ministered to her mental needs; for Irma was a woman of no mean ability and grasp of mind. These were halcyon days, when the distinguished Englishman used to stroll into her lodgings in a quiet suburb, when the warmth of the blazing afternoons sent all wayfarers into shelter, or drove herself and her brother back from the theater in his brougham on rainy nights, and shared their simple supper, talking politics with the one and vague philanthropic philosophy with the other.

Somehow it annoyed Irma to perceive that Neville was not appreciated by her brother, to whom he was elaborately polite and carefully considerate. Hugh was almost femininely acute in his perception of the indefinite, and he did not like Neville, though quite unable to say why.

The fall of the leaf sent Neville to seek refreshment at home. He asked leave to write and inquire for his charming friend, and she had laughingly given him permission, not believing he would ever avail himself of

it. He did, however, and very captivating were the letters he wrote—letters which could not be classed as love-letters, bright, amusing, observant, slightly cynical, and just tinged with tender, friendly interest in herself.

The warm autumn days were spent by Irma in a chalet among the mountains and pine woods of the Tyrol; but before the snow began to fall a trial awaited her. Hugh, the beloved brother, without whom no place seemed like home, declared his intention of going to America.

Irma was amazed, distressed, and almost indignant. After much argument and discussion, she elicited the fact that Hugh's retreat was not exactly a matter of choice. He had been drawn into a feeble plot (now in danger of discovery) against the Austrian Government. It was the autumn of 1854, and the country was in a very unsettled state. Hugh Retz's fellow-conspirators were most anxious he should escape even suspicion, as, in his present inoffensive aspect, he was, and would be, most useful to the patriotic Hungarian party. He was, therefore, prepared to obey his comrades' wishes.

Irma was profoundly alarmed. Political offenses were cruelly punished in those days all over the Continent, and Irma was amazed at the careless foolhardiness with which her brother was going to embark from Hamburg without any attempt at concealing his destination.

An engagement to sing in Paris during the early winter season offering at that moment, she persuaded Hugh to accompany her so far, and then to cross over to London and start from Liverpool, while she should take advantage of his reputation for scientific studies

and announce his departure for Australia in order to make a collection of the flora of that curious region.

Her brother was, as usual, guided by her, and in Paris they parted—really parted—for the first time in their lives.

It was a sore trial for both. They had been all in all to each other. Both had shunned society—Irma because of her mother's counsels and her individual taste, Hugh, because of the schemes with which he was entangled.

"Farewell, my well-beloved, my right royal sister," said the young man, as he stood ready to depart the night he set out for England. To him she was the grandest woman in the world, a queen, an empress, a creature whom the breath of scandal, the vulgarities of her profession, could never touch.

"I suppose the reports of your triumphs will reach me in the New World. I shall follow you in imagination, and pine to regain your side. Write often. Shall I ever meet a woman worthy to call you sister?"

"Yes, my precious one, plenty. Let me know the name you will adopt before you sail."

Then followed many warnings as to prudence and precautions; and she was alone, terribly alone, for she did not fancy having a chaperon or companion of her own grade, and was more than content with an extremely respectable, motherly lady's-maid from her own country, who had known her mother.

A month after her brother's departure she recognized Neville one night in a stage-box, and saw that he was watching her intently. It was, indeed, a joy to see his familiar face. Their correspondence had been ex-

tremely intermittent, and various reasons had prevented her replying to his last letter. Now, it seemed to her, that he had come to supply her brother's place, and when the following afternoon he presented himself in her pretty little apartment at Passy, which looked out over a garden in the Champs de Mars, he was frankly and warmly welcomed.

Never had Neville been so sympathetic, so friendly before.

The visit was repeated till it became almost diurnal, for Neville had been promoted to the rank of Chief Attaché in the British Embassy to France.

The intercourse between the beautiful songstress and the diplomat grew more and more intimate; she heard much of his difficulties, of the obstinacy of his father, Lord Hazelhurst, who not only refused to pay his debts (the interesting narrator did not mention how often his father had performed that operation already), but threatened to leave a large portion of his fortune, with which he had the power to deal, to his younger son.

Though Irma was very confidential on all matters concerning herself, she never mentioned her brother's destination; but she often spoke of him, and found a most amiable listener in her aristocratic friend.

All this time Neville had carefully preserved the brotherly tone he had adopted from the first; but latterly a something sweeter and more tender stole into their intercourse. Irma began to feel less at ease with him, less absolutely at home; yet the days fled with a swiftness at once calm and delicious.

Then came an offer from a London manager for a short engagement, about which Irma immediately con-

sulted Neville. She had always been anxious to see her mother's country, and the terms offered were good. She therefore agreed to accept them, and to take up her abode in the great capital some time before Easter.

Before that festival, Neville surprised her by a sudden, impassioned declaration of love, describing the struggles he had gone through in the endeavor to veil his feelings lest he might offend her by too early an avowal. He implored her to be his wife; he swore eternal fidelity, devotion, and all the vows usual on such occasions, with infinite grace and ardor, and Irma listened.

Then came long explanations of his social and financial position, the madness of offending his father, the arguments, the passionate pleading, the ultimate yielding.

Finally Neville prevailed, and Irma Retz, not without uneasiness and distrust, was married at an obscure registry office in the North of London, without the knowledge even of her faithful servant.

After a brief honeymoon in a little South-coast village, Irma returned to fulfil her London engagement.

She was very happy; never had she sung so deliciously or looked so lovely. Her success was greater than ever, and for a while the difficulties, the precautions which restrained their intercourse, added zest to the delight of being together.

How sweet were those stolen interviews, those cleverly contrived holidays in unfrequented places. The Saturday to Monday morning visits to curious old cathedral towns, rarely visited by "trippers," and overlooked by travelers.

Meantime, her absent brother wrote in varying moods, and Irma felt ill-at-ease about him.

"I think, George, I will not say anything to Hugh about our marriage till he returns, or you find you can acknowledge it. He has a very strong opinion respecting marriage and all connected with it."

"You must do what you think best, my dearest; whatever you choose will satisfy me," returned Neville caressingly.

"And, George, I must continue to send him money. He does a little doctoring, but not enough to support himself." By this time Irma had no secret from her husband.

"Why, of course, you will do what you like with your own. Do you think I would interfere with what you earn? I am only ashamed to add so little to the comfort, the decoration of your home. But I expect some money through a relative who has promised me present help instead of postponing it till I can inherit it by will."

Soon after this conversation, a highly remunerative engagement was offered to Irma at St. Petersburg, and though it entailed separation from Neville, she gladly accepted it, hoping to earn a prolonged holiday to spend with her husband later on. Thence she went to Berlin, where he paid her a visit, and though he seemed a little pre-occupied at times, they were happy enough.

It was early in June that Irma was free to join her husband at Weimar, as they had planned. She did not intend to take any other engagement till the autumn, and hoped Neville might obtain prolonged leave of absence; perhaps he might even pay his father a

visit and persuade him to agree to their marriage. Then the thought came to her, as it often did, that George evidently had a rooted objection to mention the subject to Lord Hazelhurst.

It was a fine, soft morning when she left Berlin, and Irma felt full to the lips with joyous life and hope and energy. She readily entered into conversation with a good-natured, bluff-looking elderly Englishman, who, with his daughter, were her fellow-travelers. They were highly pleased to speak with her in their native tongue, and complimented her on her excellent English. By-and-by the gentleman offered her a London newspaper, saying, "I suppose you see our papers pretty often?"

"Only when I am in London, and then only occasionally. I do not care much for newspapers."

The Englishman vaped a little about the superiority of the English press, and from politeness to him she opened the paper and glanced down the columns. Presently a well-known name caught her eye under the head of fashionable intelligence: "The Hon. and Mrs. George Neville left yesterday for Paris, where Mr. Neville will resume his duties as first attaché."

"What an absurd mistake," she thought, a smile stealing over her fair face. "I hope no idea that he is married has leaked out. He is so careful to keep things quiet and dark. Does he hope his father may die in ignorance of his marriage?" A slight chill seemed to touch her heart at the thought; a vague consciousness had sometimes oppressed her with a suspicion that George, her ideal gentleman, was rather unscrupulous. This, she told herself, was the result of

his diplomatic training, and in no way emanated from his original nature.

As she gazed at the lines before her they grew dim and seemed to run into each other. The sense of security with which she had first read them was fast fading away. Of course, it was an absurd mistake, but there was something of evil omen in her chancing on the paragraph so unexpectedly. Her uneasiness increased in an unreasonable manner; she grew restless; she felt breathless with desire to speak, to get some clue to the strange mistake. At last she could no longer resist. Letting the paper drop in her lap, she said to her opposite neighbor, with as easy a smile as she could manage:

"It is a curious idea to advertise the coming and going of a certain class of people in the newspapers."

"Yes, it is rather foolish. I fancy it fills up space cheaply," said the Englishman.

"I see," continued Irma, "the name of a Mr. George Neville here as returning to Paris, I suppose it is the same gentleman who was attaché at Vienna two or three years ago, as he is now in the British Embassy at Paris? He was not married in those days."

"I don't know anything about him. He is not in my line; but the Nevilles are big people."

"I think I heard of Mr. Neville being married last year, papa," put in the daughter. "A schoolfellow of mine knew some of his relations."

"Last year. Then it must be of her own marriage the girl had heard. What would George say or do if any whisper of their relationship got about?"

"Last winter?" she asked, with a note of interrogation.

"I am not sure. I fancy it was in the summer or spring."

Irma put a strong constraint upon herself, and asked no more questions, but every moment she grew more and more uneasy. Whatever the source of that alarming announcement, it was almost sure to do mischief. How burning her anxiety to see and speak with her husband grew as minutes mounted to hours, and still they rolled on. Her companions became quite uneasy about her as she grew paler and paler, and all her fascinating animation, her ready pleasant talk, died away into utter stillness and silence.

Irma confessed to a violent headache, and did her best to respond to their kind attentions. Never did distance seem so interminable as the comparatively short journey between Berlin and her destination.

At last it was reached. She bade a courteous farewell to her fellow-travelers and hastened to the hotel, where she expected to find a letter from Neville to inform her of his movements, that she might arrange their summer plans which he left entirely to her. The letter awaited her, and contained a bitter disappointment.

With many well-turned expressions of tenderness and regret he informed her that a sudden rush of work would prevent his joining her for another fortnight. "The wiseacres at home are clamoring for a new commercial treaty," he continued, "and we are up to our eyes in reports and estimates, tables of exports and imports, and heaven knows what. It is infinitely provoking to be chained here when I thirst for a sight of your beloved face," etc., etc.

Irma sat on a sofa in her bedroom gazing at this fateful epistle and thinking profoundly for a few minutes. She did not take long to decide on the course she should adopt. Hastily opening her traveling bag, she took out her writing materials, and penned the following:

"Weimar, Thursday.—Just arrived here and found your letter, my dearest husband. I must see you, for I have been alarmed by an incident of which I will tell you. I leave for Paris to-morrow morning. Come to me early on Saturday. I shall be at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, Rue des Saints Pères. Do not fail this appointment. I am ill at ease.—Your loving Wife, Irma."

How she bore up through the remainder of that evening, the night, and the next day's journey Irma could never tell. But she breathed more freely when she reached Paris. To-morrow, early, she would see Neville and hear his voice, and her strange fears, her doubts, all would vanish in the sunshine of his presence. There was a line from him addressed to "Mademoiselle Retz" awaiting her. Curiously enough the sight of that "Mademoiselle Retz" hurt her as it never had before. Within were these words: "Shall be with you to-morrow between ten and eleven.—G."

Altogether she felt more hopeful, and worn out with her long journey and a previously sleepless night, she hastened to bed.

She was quite alone, having given her good Hedwig a long holiday, and the wherewithal to enjoy herself among her Hungarian kinsfolk. Sleep was merciful to

her; her rest was profound, and she rose with renewed courage. All would come right: all must come right.

The clock of a neighboring church had just chimed the half-hour when a knock on her sitting-room door made Irma's heart stand still an instant and then beat vehemently.

"Come in," she exclaimed, instinctively in English.

Neville entered. He looked dark and ill, and thinner than when she parted with him. She saw at a glance that, although his eyes welcomed her with a look of passionate admiration, there was a set, stern expression about his mouth; but she was in his arms, her lips on his.

"You have not been well, George?"

"Well, no; but I shall be better now you have come. What has annoyed you—or alarmed you?" he asked, looking at her searchingly. She fancied his manner was peculiarly grave and commanding.

"Now that I am with you it seems too absurd to be uneasy," she said smiling; "but I was afraid you would be vexed. I will tell you." She repeated the story of her rencontre with the Englishman and his daughter, and of reading the announcement of Mr. and Mrs. George Neville's departure for Paris. While she spoke Neville took and held her hand close.

There was a dead silence when she had finished. Then Neville rose, walked away down the room, and returned to stand opposite her, leaning one hand slightly on a table, his right being thrust inside his waistcoat, as though to keep his heart still.

"Irma," he said, in a low, steady, impressive voice, "I am going to put your love, your courage, your com-

mon-sense to the proof. I do not think you will disappoint me."

"I hope not," she returned, her pulse standing still for an instant with wild, undefined terror.

"You will always be my real wife, Irma," he continued in the same firm tone; "but, the lady who accompanied me here about a week ago is in the eyes of society my legitimate wife."

"Are you putting me to some test as patient Grizel's husband did her?" she asked with a strange smile.

"No, my beloved. I have done you a vile wrong. I loved you so distractedly that I was ready to commit any crime to call you mine. If you love as I do, we can still belong to each other, still enjoy stolen visits to heaven—see! I put myself utterly in your power. You can ruin me—you can put me in prison."

"Stay," exclaimed Irma, who had grown deadly pale, but whose composure had returned to her. "Let me understand." She pressed her hand to her brow "When, when did you marry this lady? Have I been all these months your—mistress? "Oh, God! Oh, God!"

Neville did not answer immediately; his quick brain, his cool, callous self-possession enabled him to see the possible advantage he might gain if she believed she had never been his wife. Shame and pride would keep her silent.

"Last year!" he echoed; "before you came to London. Despair gives me strength to confess the truth I never intended you to know. I hoped to call you mine forever. I love you at this moment as dearly as in the first moments of transport. Be brave and true to me, my beloved, my soul's delight."

Pages might be filled with the passionate entreaties, the sophistries he poured out. But Irma did not seem to hear him: she appeared turned to stone. Neville grew alarmed. In his way he did love her; she had never crossed or worried him. Her reputation was so absolutely spotless; there was such a delicate purity in her mind and ways, that, cynic as he was, he believed thoroughly in her, and was immensely proud of having won her. Yet all this excellence, this charm, was as nothing in the balance against his ambition, his desire to take a commanding position in the world of politics and diplomacy. Morality did not exist for him. He could not understand why people thought marriage indispensable, especially when a woman belonged to a certain grade—a profession like Irma's. She really would lose nothing by being his mistress. She could live in the most respectable fashion, and he could not bear the idea of losing what was at present the most delightful ingredient in his life. Her silence was alarming; was she going to be ill, or mad, or——

"Speak to me, Irma, for heaven's sake, speak!"

"Answer one question," she said slowly, absently. "Were you married—when—when I went to London?"

"Yes, yes! But why hark back uselessly! I committed bigamy rather than lose you, my darling, my most precious love. Do not stand there like a statue! You do not love me; you never have loved me, or you would not be so adamant!"

"No," she said in an odd mechanical way, "I never loved you, George Neville! I loved the man I thought you were. Your real self is a stranger to me! I know you now for the first time, and also for the first time

I know the depth of my own degradation in having given myself to such as you are! Go—leave me! the sight of you is loathsome!”

Neville was astonished by her deadly composure, Prayers, appeals, reproaches, nothing moved her from her attitude of cold contempt. He at last perceived that he had killed her love for him at one fell blow, and with it every shadow of power over her.

“If I told my story,” she said at length, “it would do you serious harm. There are breaches of honor which even the most emancipated profligates hesitate to commit. You have not only been guilty of such a breach, but you have made yourself amenable to criminal law. Qualifying for the dock will not advance your diplomatic career, nor bring peace to your new home. You are in my power, but I promise you silence—if you leave me and never approach me again.”

Have you no compassion, no sympathy for the desperate need which drove me into my unlucky marriage?”

“Had you compassion? Go! leave me: the sight of you suffocates me.” She pressed her hand to her heart, growing deadly pale again, for she had flushed with indignation. “Do you wish to destroy the life you have ruined? Liar! cheat! begone!”

Her insulting words stung him to anger. “Good-by, then,” he said, “you will yet regret those words.” Then he turned and left the room.

Scarcely knowing what she did, Irma threw herself against the door, her chest heaving, her breath coming in deep gasps; then she locked it, as if to secure herself against the man for whom her love had turned to loathing.

She was almost paralyzed. For the moment she went down into hell! At last, when the wild whirl of despair, of fury, of shame settled into a consciousness of the terrible inevitableness of her position, her chief thought was for concealment, not only of what was past, but what was to come, of the horror which awaited her in the near distance. All she desired now was to conceal her story from the world, and far beyond the world from her brother, her beloved brother, who believed her unapproachable in purity, in nobility, a fit bride for an emperor. No! she vowed to herself she should never know—never.

Irma's agony, long drawn out, her mental struggles, her arrangement of complicated plans for concealing the birth of her expected baby cannot be detailed; the result is already known to the reader.

Not even to her faithful Hungarian Abigail did she confide her bitter grief, her painful anticipations. She left her in Vienna, having impressed upon her that an operation was necessary to save one of her eyes, for which absolute silence and seclusion were important. She was, therefore, going to consult a famous oculist in London; but she was never to let any creature know her whereabouts. She told the same tale to her impressario, charging him not to attempt any communication with her till she informed him if she had been cured or not.

Then she came to London. Before secluding herself at Mrs. Wingrove's she made a woful pilgrimage to the Registry Office, where she had been united to Neville, wondering more and more at his reckless villainy.

Here Irma obtained a certificate of her marriage. Her motive in procuring this was hardly clear to herself; a vague idea that she would like to have the means of proving, if necessary, that she had every right to consider herself Neville's wife, was what chiefly actuated her.

From the moment when Neville unmasked himself, she was filled with a sense of indignant disgust at the notion of being the mother of his child, which, as time went on, increased to a morbid degree, and gradually included the innocent being now on the confines of existence, in its half insane repugnance.

Then when she looked on the face of her son and fancied she could trace in the baby face some likeness to Neville, she turned from it with shame and horror.

Yet she would not have done the helpless creature any injury, only she wanted it out of her sight.

In the profound interest and affection shown by Mrs. Wingrove for the infant Irma saw her chance. She would escape; she would leave no trace; she could always send money to help the kind landlady; she would teach the boy some humble industry; and he would probably fare quite as well as under her own unloving care.

Soon after she had successfully carried out her project her brother found things had quieted down sufficiently to make his return safe. She had the great joy of welcoming him at Vienna. But he was sadly changed in health, and soon she found that after the artistic labors necessary to provide for them both, her chief occupation was nursing him.

About four years after his return they were in Paris,

where Irma was a great favorite, when she met Colonel Stapylton, who was enjoying a holiday after some years of Indian service. Irma now went more into society than formerly; indeed, she hated being alone, and her brother was always anxious she should be seen and admired.

Accident threw her among English people, with whom Colonel Stapylton was intimate. He was immensely struck by her beauty and charm, and soon avowed his affection and pressed her to marry him. Irma's days of love and romance had disappeared forever, but she had a deep regard and sincere liking for the straightforward, well-bred soldier, and would have been ready enough to settle down into a life-long companionship, but so long as Neville lived, marriage was not for her.

From time to time his name reached her in newspapers, etc. She knew that his father was dead; that he had taken his seat in the House of Peers; that he had resigned the diplomatic service.

About this time Hugh Retz caught a slight cold one autumn afternoon—slight, but sufficient in his weak, consumptive condition to open the gates of death for his gentle, noble spirit. And Irma found herself, indeed, alone.

During the last sad days, Colonel Stapylton, who had returned to Paris, was of infinite comfort and help to Irma. His tenderness and consideration won her heart.

A day or two after she had laid her best-beloved in the grave, she took up in a half-unconscious way, an English newspaper Colonel Stapylton had left behind

that morning, and in it she read the announcement of Lord Hazelhurst's death and the succession of his nephew to the title and estates.

A strange sense of relief, of freedom, seemed to restore her. She was so sad, so lonely, that she naturally turned to Stapylton for support, and he as naturally repeated his offer.

Then she told him her whole story with the exception of one incident; she could not bring herself to risk losing his esteem, his affection by confessing that she had deserted her innocent, helpless baby; she felt with sudden force how cruel, how unnatural she had been.

Stapylton was only melted to deeper tenderness by her sad story, and pressed her more ardently to become his wife.

She consented. At the end of her engagement in Paris they crossed the Channel and were very quietly married in London in the presence of Colonel Stapylton's brother and sister-in-law, and one or two English friends of Irma, starting immediately after for Italy, en route to India. A new and most peaceful life had opened for Irma, and her deserted son was almost forgotten.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE confession which Lady Stapylton addressed to her husband was brief, for it only related to the birth and desertion of her son. Moreover, it was related in the fewest possible words, without the smallest attempt to palliate her guilt. When she had finished her miserable story, she added these words:

"Having laid this plague-spot bare, I have not the courage to seek you. Be merciful and come to me! May God incline your heart to equity rather than justice."

A long hour of agony passed while the unhappy woman counted the slow seconds as they dropped into the abyss of the past.

She partly lay upon the sofa, her face hidden in the cushions—waiting—waiting.

At last a step approached, then the door opened and closed again, and her husband's voice said, "Irma."

She forced herself to rise, and stood before him with a downcast, guilty air that sent a sharp pang of unspeakable bitterness through his honest heart; that he should be called upon to judge and to condemn his cherished wife was indeed a blow. He did not know what to say, what to do.

"Irma," he began again, "if any one, any man, had dared to accuse you as you have accused yourself, I should have horsewhipped him for an infamous slan-

derer! Is it possible that you, the kindest, the most generous woman I have ever known, the tender, devoted mother of our dear daughter, could have deserted your own helpless baby, left it to the chance kindness of strangers? What was it that turned your nature to such cruel hardness, such unwomanly cruelty?"

"I did not quite desert him at first, Robert! I disguised myself and saw him two or three times."

"Then why—why did you not take him to your heart?"

She made no reply; she stood with half-averted face, her hands clasped and dropped to the length of her arms before her.

"Speak to me, Irma! say something for yourself, my unhappy wife! Why, why did you tell me, now?"

"Because I did not wish to rob my son of his birthright, as well as of a mother."

"His birthright?" repeated Sir Robert, whose mind was filled with the terrible fact of his wife's guilt, to the exclusion of all side issues.

"Yes; do you not see that Hugh is—now—Lord Hazelhurst? If George was a free man when he married me—Hugh is his legitimate son, therefore his heir."

"Yes, yes, he is! But that is nothing to me! What is anything to me compared to the terrible agony of finding that you have done wrong, so desperately wrong!" He threw himself into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

His wife stood still, gazing at him with eyes in which fear and shame were softening into tenderness.

"What shall I do?" she whispered at last. "Do

you wish me to go away from you and Val? Whatever your sentence, I will obey it!" she said with an abject resignation which cut him to the heart.

"Do you want me to pass sentence of death upon myself? I owe you more than twenty exquisitely happy years! I cannot let you go! Oh, Irma! how could you have done this thing?"

"I do not know; I was mad, blind with a fury of hatred and loathing and indignation! The idea of having to love and cherish a child of George Neville's drove me frantic! Had it been a girl, pity might have grown upon me—for a boy I had none! Then my whole soul was engrossed in the desire to hide my grievous, shameful story, to stand forever blameless in my brother's sight! And I did! He lived a few happy years, and died peacefully, believing I was beyond the reach of ill. I did not leave my poor boy quite unprovided for, as I told you. But it was when Valerie came and I first felt the joy of motherhood that the wickedness of my act roused my conscience! I longed to make amends; I repented with tears of anguish that I had not told you all—all—but I feared to destroy your love, your respect! And now what has it all come to?"

Sir Robert rose and paced to and fro in silence for a minute or two,

At last he exclaimed: "We took each other for better for worse, and you have made life worthless to me if it is to be spent away from you! I will help you through these desperate rapids in the river of our life!"

"Your goodness, your generosity are boundless, but nothing can ever reconcile me to my base, cowardly

self! How can I ever face my daughter? How can I bear my life if she turns from me?"

A sort of convulsion passed over her face; she pressed her hand to her heart, her lips turned blue rather than white, and a moan, expressive of great pain, broke from her. Her husband, fearing she would faint, started up, and caught her in his arms. Once in that haven, the terrible tension of Lady Stapylton's nerves gave way, and blessed tears came to her relief.

It was long before she could regain sufficient composure to talk connectedly with Sir Robert, as to what was best to be done. She was utterly broken, yet more at rest than she had been since her eyes, her instinct, first told her at the Caresford Ball that Brown, V. C., was her son. It was indeed a real "remission of her sins" to lean her aching head on her husband's shoulder and feel she was to have his support in the terrible task of atonement, of tearing away the veil from her past life which lay before her.

After Sir Robert had yielded to his loving wish to befriend his erring wife, his deep interest in Hugh revived, and he grew anxious to secure his rights. For the present he must not be agitated by learning the secret of his birth and parentage, and until he knew nothing must be said. So they agreed that for the present nothing could be done, save that Sir Robert proposed to go to London, and lay the whole case before his solicitor, who had been not only his confidential adviser for years, but was a relation. They would then be prepared to act as soon as the moment came to "unmask their batteries," as Sir Robert said.

"Now, my love, go and lie down, and try to recover

yourself by dinner-time. Put a good face on the matter, and remember I'll stand by you! The person I am sorry for is poor Lady Hazelhurst! What a blow to her pride, her sense of respectability, to think she has never been a wife!"

"We must deal most gently with her; I am sorry for her. I well know the shame and indignation of feeling one has been deceived in such a matter as marriage."

Lady Stapylton clung close to her husband, whispering her deep gratitude before she left him to obey his injunctions, and endeavor to seem like herself when they met at dinner.

Sir Robert leaned against the window-frame and gazed out over the picturesque surroundings of his fair home.

He had little anticipated such a blow as had fallen on him. It was too bad to be delivered, bound hand and foot, after a long and honorable life, to those tormentors, the scandal-mongers. And his beautiful, charming wife! How was it that the Devil had been given such power over so perfect a creature! Then the long line of years passed in review before him. All Irma's fine qualities, her sweet serenity, her generosity, her far-seeing sympathy, her clear common-sense that had enriched his life; all seemed emblazoned on the standard she bore—her deep love for himself. With all his soul he "saluted the colors."

At dinner-time Valerie brought a message from her mother, who excused herself from joining them on the score of fatigue.

"She has been wearing herself out nursing Brown,"

said the General to Dr. O'Grady, who was dining, as he often did, at the Lodge.

"Yes, and a capital nurse my lady makes; she exercises a sort of magnetic power over the poor fellow. Faith! he fell on his feet the day he came to Castle-town! Begad! the tears come to me when I see that darlin' girl, Miss Neville, look at him with her beautiful eyes and hear her speak to him! It's just the real love-light in the one, and heart-music in the other! It will be bitter hard for both of them to part after this sort of care-taking. And parting is dangerous; there's many a slip between the cup and the lip, the heiress of Caresford will have as many suitors as there are days in the year."

"Margaret Neville will be faithful and true!" cried Valerie. "No one knows her as well as I do! And her fortune is the least part of the riches she will bestow on her husband. Still there are trying times before them."

"Less trying, perhaps, than you anticipate," said Sir Robert. "Pray, Doctor, when do you think we can move our patient downstairs?"

"Oh, early next week. He has made great strides towards recovery the last three days."

"When can he hope to travel?"

"Oh, I am afraid to fix a date; not before November, I'm afraid. The sea-voyage will do him a lot of good! Now we must keep him as bright and cheerful as possible; but don't let Miss Neville come here the first day he moves. It would be too much excitement for him. Can you manage a bedroom down stairs for a few nights, to avoid fatigue?"

"Yes, of course!" exclaimed Val. "He can have my little morning-room to sit in and you study, dad, to sleep in."

"Yes, quite so—thanks!" returned Sir Robert with a smile. "I am going up to town for a week or two on Wednesday or Thursday next, so you can have the run of the house."

"How long shall you be away?" asked Valerie.

"Three or four days—a week—I am not sure. I'll see Preston while I am in London."

"I wish you would make mother go with you and see some great doctor; she is not at all well. I could hardly hear her speak when I went to her room just now!"

"I am of Miss Stapylton's way of thinking," said O'Grady. "Your wife wants putting to rights, Sir Robert."

"I know that," he returned a very grave look stealing over his face. "She has promised me to see Sir William Kearsley, and put herself into his hands as soon as poor Brown is strong enough to leave us."

"Kearsley? he is the great heart specialist!"

"Why, I am sure mother has nothing wrong with her heart!" cried Valerie, an anxious look stealing into her eyes.

"No, I hope not; but somehow she has a fancy for Kearsley," returned the General.

"Any high-class man of that description will do," said O'Grady. "There's such a close relationship among all the organs that the thorough knowledge of one will give a very fair amount of acquaintance with the others. Moreover, a really good doctor will send a

patient to some one more practised than himself in the particular malady with which the sufferer is afflicted !”

No more was said then ; but Valerie’s vague uneasiness about her mother took a more definite form from that time.

“ I will take the midday train to-morrow if you wish it,” said Sir Robert to his wife the evening before he was to leave for town. “ But I assure you it is quite as safe in the night as by daylight.”

“ No doubt ! but I see nothing now but danger and suffering before us !”

“ You must exert your will, my love, to banish these morbid notions. You have had great sorrows and trials, but I see a peaceful sunset before you ! Did you get Dr. McNab’s address from Margaret ?”

“ Yes ; she was rather surprised at my asking for it. I see she wears an old Italian marquise ring, which I left for my boy’s use when I left him ! He must have kept it all these years, for Margaret told me he had given it to her. Here ”—handing him an envelope—“ there are a few addresses that may be useful. Margaret has been to see Mrs. McNab with her aunt, and says she is a very charming woman. How strangely things have drifted together, and seem to be disentangling themselves !”

“ The most extraordinary feature in the whole strange story is that one or two inquiries would have revealed the whole truth, and saved you from so much misery, from such a fatal mistake. Neville’s patron, the devil, did him yeoman’s service when he suggested that self-accusation of bigamy, making you—not Lady Hazel-

hurst—the victim. Did it never cross your mind to doubt him?”

“Never! not for a moment! I had heard him at the outset of our acquaintance often say he must retrieve his fortunes by marriage. Then it was so much more likely that he should victimize an operatic singer, a nobody, than a wealthy high-born woman! I never doubted—I knew no English people to ask—I was absorbed in one intense, passionate effort to conceal the terrible, shameful truth from the world—which would never believe I was not willingly deceived—and above all, from my brother.”

“Knowing you, I understand it,” said Sir Robert, “but it will be hard for others to do so. At all events, your successful concealment has cost you dear, and will probably cost you still dearer. We must be entirely guided by what Marchmont says. He is absolutely safe, as far as letting a whisper of the business transpire too soon. I shall be impatient until you can tell Hugh Brown his real history. Take your own time! Do not put too great a strain upon yourself—if you can help it. Remember how precious your life is to me.”

“Is it? Is it still? Oh, my husband!” And covering her face with her handkerchief, she wept bitterly, till Sir Robert soothed her.

“Pluck up your heart, Irma; you are doing the right thing now, and in spite of—of your fatal mistake. I am sure your son, as well as your husband, will stand by you, remembering that you had cruelly bad treatment and provocation. At all events, do your duty, let what may come.”

"I wonder how soon Hugh will be strong enough to bear my revelation?"

"Be very cautious, Irma. I shall have all the more time to give Marchmont to get up the case. It's well that when you told me your disastrous story I prevented your tearing up your marriage certificate. I have kept it carefully."

"I suppose the record of the marriage could always be found at the Registry Office?"

"True; but I can testify to your having handed the certificate to me, why, twenty-one or two years ago."

"Shall you have to testify?"

"I am tolerably sure I must."

"What have I not brought upon you!"

"Come, my dear, do not let your courage evaporate. Whatever happens, we must not let your son be robbed of his birthright."

Sir Robert went up to town next day. Never before did his wife feel the loss of his presence so keenly. His faithful affection was a tower of strength to her, and for his sake she vowed that she would bear all things bravely, and give as little trouble as she could.

The change to fresh rooms and another part of the house seemed most beneficial to the carefully-tended invalid, who was further cheered by Sir Robert's promise to interview the powers that be on his behalf.

It was the third day after Hugh had been established down-stairs when Margaret was allowed to see him.

"I wanted to come yesterday so much," she said, drawing a low chair beside the sofa on which he lay, "but my aunt wished me to stay at home, for the Marchioness was to come some time between luncheon

and tea time. She has not been at Caresford for two years, and though we—my aunt and I—are not very friendly just now”—she smiled a mischievous little smile—“I try to avoid affronting her as much as I can.”

“Quite right. We must make allowance for her. I cannot wonder at her being annoyed by your choice of a soldier of fortune—which means no fortune at all. You mean the Marchioness of Uppingham, I suppose.”

“Yes, of course. Marchionesses are not quite as plentiful as blackberries.”

“No; I had a letter from her son yesterday, quite a long one for him. Where is it? I must have left it in my room. No matter. It is a carefully constructed epistle, very gracious and sympathetic, full of good wishes for my speedy recovery. He is in town, and hopes to be appointed A.D.C. to some relative who has just accepted the Viceroyalty of Ireland; says if he were not hunting up patronage he would have run down to see me. I don't want him.”

“He is amusing, and quite *un homme de société*, but not very real.”

“Oh, I had another letter that really did my heart good.”

“Who from, Hugh?”

“From a dear, delightful woman.”

“This is alarming,” cried Margaret, raising her eyebrows in affected dismay. “Name this terrible person.”

“My early friend, Mrs. McNab! O'Grady tells me that she and the doctor have telegraphed and written frequently to him for news of me. Now they have his leave to write to myself, Mrs. McNab has availed her-

self of it. I must show that missive to you—I am quite proud of it. Is it not lucky, Margaret, that my right arm is safe? But it is weak; I am weak all over. Still, I managed to walk from my bedroom in here to-day with Callaghan's help. He is my Irish orderly—a capital fellow. I was done at the end of that extensive promenade. I could not hold you a minute longer than you choose to stay, you sweet, shy bird, were I to try and steal a few kisses. I get so few now. Couldn't you manage to bestow some freely? As you are strong, be merciful and generous, my darling. Give what I cannot take."

And Margaret, leaning her hand on the top of the sofa behind his head, softly, with infinite tenderness, kissed his brow, his eyes, and yielding to the gentle pressure of his arm, bent still lower to touch his lips.

"How good you are, my sweetheart, my heart's delight! How shall I ever leave you?"

"Do not speak of that terrible time," returned Margaret, growing a little paler. "Thank God, I can come and see you. I have been expecting to be locked up, and all sorts of things. My aunt threatened me with the Lord Chancellor! I know she has been busy writing to my guardians and Rupert Manvers and her solicitor, but still there is no declaration of war."

"Ah! Lady Stapylton!" exclaimed Brown, whose sofa commanded the door. "Margaret has been telling me that she anticipates imprisonment and all the terrors of the High Court of Chancery. But Lady Hazelhurst holds her hand."

"Margaret, so sorry you were not here yesterday to see the General before he went up to town. You are

looking pale, my dear. Has your aunt been frightening you?" asked Lady Stapylton, who had been rather late in leaving her room, and had come to pay her daily visit to Hugh.

"Oh, no, I am not so easily frightened; but I want to keep the peace while Hugh is here. How much better he is looking. But his hair sorely needs cutting." And she pointed to his abundant golden locks. As she did so the glitter of the ring Hugh had given her caught Lady Stapylton's eye.

"I have never seen you wear that ring before," she exclaimed, her heart beating vehemently.

"Oh, yes, you have. Hugh gave it to me the day before he was smashed up."

"Yes," said Hugh, "there is a long story attached to it, which I cannot tell now."

"There is an inscription inside," added Margaret.

"*'Sempre l'istessa'*?" cried Lady Stapylton incautiously.

"How do you know?" exclaimed Margaret, opening her eyes in astonishment.

"Oh, I know that shaped ring is Italian, and they often have that inscription. I will not ask you to take it off, dear. May it be a good omen to you both!"

After a brief pause, she resumed: "I imagine the shrewd men of the world who are Lady Hazelhurst's advisers think it more prudent to put their trust in the effects of time and absence than in overt action, therefore they are keeping quiet."

"How disgusted they must be that I am recovering," cried Hugh; "I suppose I am the incarnation of evil in their eyes."

"They will be glad to make friends with you yet," said Lady Stapylton prophetically.

Margaret indemnified herself by staying considerably later than usual. Indeed, it was quite dark when her carriage was announced, Lady Hazelhurst having sent the brougham for her. It had been a delightful day.

Lady Stapylton, Margaret, and Valerie had worked and read and talked in Brown's special sitting-room; and he, with the delicious sense of reviving vitality thrilling through his veins, felt that "if there was an Elysium on earth" it was the well-named abode where he had been coaxed back to life. Margaret, dear to him from the first hour their eyes had exchanged electric glances, was now the life of his life, the core of his being. His trust in her had no limit, and the future to him held but sunshine and flowers. If—if only the God in whom he steadfastly believed would grant him grace and good fortune to distinguish himself and prove him worthy the wonderful destiny which seemed to lie before him.

After a card announcing his safe arrival, a couple of days went by without a letter from Sir Robert. He was then able to report his interview with his lawyer to Lady Stapylton.

"Old Marchmont had luckily returned to town and was profoundly interested in the General's statement. As yet he could offer no opinion, as the case would require very strong proof. I left all the papers and memoranda with Marchmont," continued Sir Robert, "who will look carefully into matters; so when I have seen Preston, and ascertain really how long they will wait for Brown, I shall return home and stay with you

till Marchmont wishes to see me. I wish you would watch your opportunity to break the truth to Brown. Ask O'Grady if he is equal to hear a startling piece of news."

Lady Stapylton mused long over this letter; she longed, yet dreaded, to reveal herself to her son. How would he take the intelligence? Ah! what would Valerie think?

The morning after this letter was received was Wednesday, and O'Grady generally came up to see his patient on Wednesday.

It was a fine crisp morning with a tinge of frosty white on the lawn.

"It is time I began to make my preparations," exclaimed Brown, who had walked to the window unassisted. "I am gathering strength rapidly, and I could not start at a better time for India."

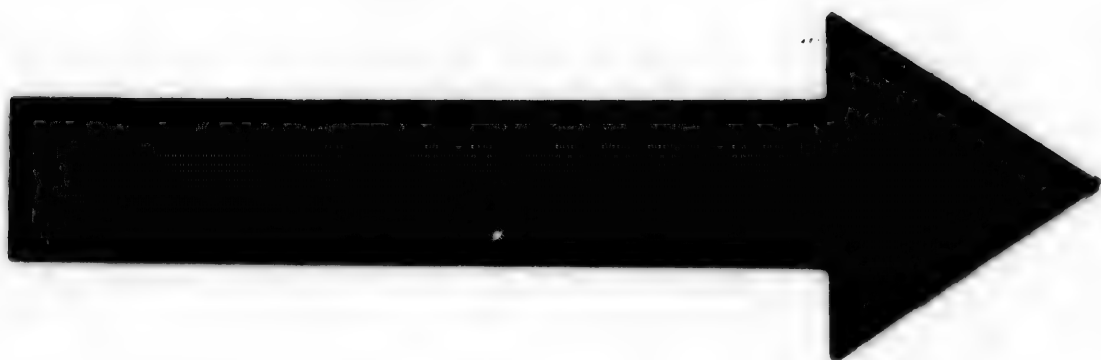
"Do not be in a hurry," said Lady Stapylton, putting another log on the fire. "It is quite cold to-day. Don't you think you might dine with us to-day? You seem so much stronger."

"I should like it; but you must ask O'Grady. He is pretty sure to be here to-day."

"Isn't this a little beauty!" cried Valerie, coming into the cosy sitting-room, carrying a small black puppy. "This is one of Nerissa's puppies. You know my black Pomeranian, Mr. Brown. She is such a dear, affectionate mother."

"Yes. How wonderful the mother instinct is," said Brown, taking the little creature from her.

"There is the doctor—I hear wheels!" exclaimed Val; and the next moment the butler announced:—



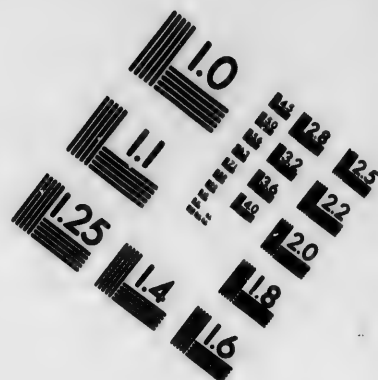
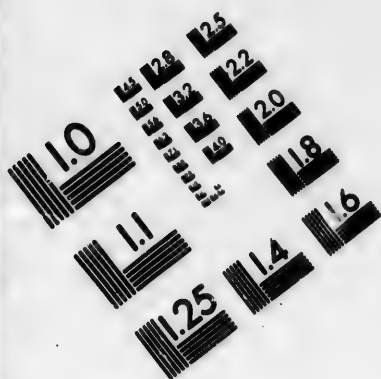
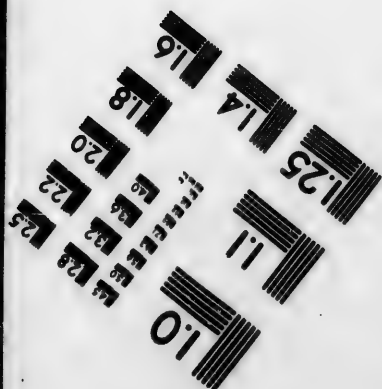
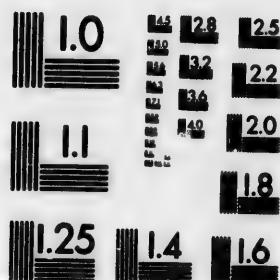


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"Dr. O'Grady."

"I'll be the whiteheaded boy to-day," cried the jovial Irishman. "I've brought a good friend to see you." He half turned towards a gentleman who followed him—a short, thick-set man with sharp twinkling dark eyes and grizzled hair. "Here's Dr. Macnab come to see how you are going on."

Brown started from the sofa to greet his ex-guardian, but Macnab stood still, his eyes fixed on Lady Stapylton, an expression of open-mouthed astonishment on his face, and a half-uttered exclamation of surprise on his lips.

Lady Stapylton stood facing him for half a second, then stretched out one hand in a blind, helpless manner, and fell forward.

O'Grady caught her. Dr. Macnab came to his assistance, and between them they laid her on Hugh's sofa in a deep swoon.

CHAPTER XXV.

VALERIE uttered a cry of dismay: "Oh, mother! mother!" and sprang to her side. "She is not dead! Oh, say she is not dead!"

"No more than you are," said O'Grady, whom she addressed; "she'll come all right presently. I think you two (to Brown and Macnab) had better clear out! She ought not to find any stranger near her when she opens her eyes."

"Give me your arm," said Brown to Dr. Macnab. He had grown pale at the sight of his kind hostess's sudden insensibility, and exchanged a glance full of sympathy with Valerie who stood flushed and trembling beside the recumbent figure of her mother.

He directed their steps to the drawing-room, Macnab keeping silence, a look of deep gravity clouding his square, honest face.

"This is very unfortunate," exclaimed Brown; "I have thought Lady Stapylton better and brighter just lately. She rather wore herself out sitting up with me. I cannot tell you how kind she has been; she has been more like a mother than a new acquaintance, which she really is."

"I daresay," returned Macnab drily, and mentally cautioning himself to be careful in his speech till he saw how the land lay. "I am delighted to see you look so much better than I expected," he continued.

"You have had a bad time of it. It is a wonder you escaped so well. At any rate, you seem in clover here. How do you come to be so intimate with these people?"

"I told you it was serving under Sir Robert Stapylton that I got my first chance."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Macnab, "but it doesn't always happen that a man's women-kind follow suit; though it's not incomprehensible in this case," added the doctor with a grin.

"Oh, I don't know; Lady Stapylton rather took to me; and when they found I was badly hurt just outside their park paling, they very kindly took me in."

"I see. My wife has been desperately anxious about you; it was as much to keep her quiet as to please myself I ran down here to see you. I seemed somehow to startle her ladyship, eh? Who was she, by the way?"

"I think her name was Retz; she was a celebrated singer."

"Ah, I fancy we have met before; anyhow, I hope I did not affect her unpleasantly."

"Oh, no; that is not likely."

They continued to talk confidentially; but Brown thought his good friend rather distraught. Moreover, the fact of his determination to keep profound silence respecting the most important episode of his own life considerably checked the flow of his conversation and confidence on other subjects.

But Hugh was growing very anxious to know if Lady Stapylton was recovering from her death-like faint. The look of pain, of alarm in her face, had impressed him profoundly.

"I really must go and ask if Lady Stapylton is all right again," he exclaimed at last.

"You had better not overdo it," said Macnab, "just when you are beginning to get about. Ring the bell. I'd go, only——" He paused not liking to admit the reason of his hesitation.

His eyes met Brown's, and each understood that there was some mystery in this sudden seizure. The entrance of O'Grady interrupted the awkward pause.

"She has come to!" he exclaimed, "but is a bit dazed. We'll get her away to her own room. I don't like this sort of attack. Her heart's none too strong; she's a charming creature, and as good as gold! Very vexed, too, on your account and Brown's. She's all right, though for the present. Poor Miss Valerie got a devil of a start—the darlin' girl! I'll just go and see her safe upstairs, and I'll come back to you. Made a capital cure of this fellow, eh?" slapping Brown on the back. "He'll be fit to travel—slowly, I fancy—in another fortnight or three weeks," and O'Grady fussed away.

"That's good news for you, isn't it? I suppose you have been fretting your soul out at the delay in taking up your appointment."

"I have, indeed; but I now begin to hope they will wait a little longer for me, especially as Sir Robert is going to see some of the big men at the Horse Guards on my behalf." And they continued to talk till Dr. O'Grady returned to say that Lady Stapylton was quite herself again, and begged that Macnab would stay to luncheon, as she was specially anxious to speak to him before he left.

Luncheon was not so animated as was usual at the Lodge. Valerie, though an excellent deputy-hostess, had not quite recovered the shock of seeing her mother lying in a state of death-like insensibility. O'Grady was puzzled by the consciousness that something was at work under the surface which he could not understand; and Dr. Macnab was utterly uncomfortable, dreading the interview before him, as even plucky men always do, the possibility of an emotional scene with a woman, young, old, or middle-aged. Hugh Brown felt rather than perceived, that no one was quite at ease, and, therefore, felt less exhilarated than he expected to be on this the first occasion of joining the family at table.

It was then a relief to all when the sound of a carriage driving up was quickly followed by the announcement of "Miss Neville," and she was warmly greeted.

She immediately recognized Macnab, and inquired courteously for his wife, expressing her regret that she had not visited the Court as she had half promised to do in the spring. She apologized for intruding on them, and observed that they must be later than usual at luncheon.

"We are, indeed," said Valerie; "pray sit down, Margaret, and eat one of these pears. They are the first fruits of my own particular tree. You remember our planting it?"

"Yes, quite well," and Margaret sat down on Macnab's right, peeling her pear very deliberately, while Val described Lady Stapylton's sudden seizure.

"We are fortunate in having two doctors on the premises, however," she continued; "and mother is going to see them both after luncheon."

When they rose from the table, the two girls went off to visit the Pomeranian puppies, Valerie first ascertaining that her mother was much better and ready to see Dr. Macnab.

"I say, Hugh," exclaimed the latter as he accompanied his ward back to the room appropriated to him previous to ascending to Lady Stapylton's, "how comes that very fascinating young heiress to be wearing your ring?—the old marquise ring—and on her left third finger, too?"

"Oh, she rather took a fancy to it; and, of course, I presented it to her."

"Um! maybe so; but queer suspicions present themselves."

"Her ladyship would be glad to see you, sir," said Lady Stapylton's maid, a somewhat severe-looking female.

"Oh, I'm coming! See you again, Hugh, my boy, when I come down. You know I must go back to London to-night." And with a rueful countenance Macnab followed the Abigail upstairs, who ushered him into the room where her mistress was lying on a sofa and the blinds were drawn down—she set a chair for the visitor and softly closed the door. Macnab would willingly have given fifty pounds to purchase permission to retreat with her.

"At last!" said Lady Stapylton, holding out a thin, tremulous hand to him. "You must, indeed, have been amazed to see me."

"Yes, for an instant; but I always felt sure that some day we should meet again; but—I didn't feel the shock as you did."

"You had a conscience void of offense. I was aware that Hugh corresponded with you. It was not surprise so much as emotion, a flood of memories, which swept over me and seemed to paralyze my heart!" She stopped, breathing heavily, her hand on her heart.

"It is not wise to agitate yourself."

"I must, for I want you to tell Hugh—he must know! I suppose you think me a bad, cruel woman! You are right! And all my base conduct has been inspired by a mere mistake, a piece of incredible stupidity. Listen to me with patience. I am going to do what I can to atone for my wicked desertion of my son."

Then, as briefly as she could, with a certain desperate composure, she told her story to her deeply interested listener, who could not conceal the severity with which he judged her action.

Down-stairs Valerie and Margaret talked intermittently with Brown, for O'Grady was obliged to return to barracks, Valerie engaging to convey Macnab to the station in time for the night express.

"How long Dr. Macnab is staying with mother," exclaimed Valerie. "I am inclined to go and take him away. I cannot get over the fright she gave me to-day. I am sure Dr. Macnab startled her in some way. Yet he seems a kind, honest kind of person."

"He may come down directly, and you may trust your mother with him. He is a most skilful doctor and a good, sympathetic man," said Brown. "I am extremely glad you like his wife, Margaret; she has always been an ideal woman to me."

"Margaret, you are very silent. What is the matter?" asked Val.

"Not much—yet enough. My aunt declares her sciatica will oblige her to go to Algeria or some such climate—and, I suppose, I cannot let her go alone. She talks of starting immediately. Then I come here and find Hugh sitting at lunch as if quite well—that means he will soon be strong enough to take flight—and—and—I do not think parting sweet sorrow."

"No; that it is not—but——"

"I will go and ask Martha if she thinks I may interrupt mother!" said Valerie discreetly, and left Hugh to console his fiancée as best he could. He had partially succeeded, and had just exclaimed, "There is some disturbing element in the air, I am quite sure; everything seems gloomy and uncertain——" when Macnab entered the room, looking exceedingly grave.

"Where is Miss Stapylton? Her mother is anxious she should telegraph at once to Sir Robert, and ask him to return if possible to-morrow."

He looked uneasily at Margaret, who rose, saying, "I will tell Val, and say good-by, Mr. Brown, as I am sure the carriage is waiting. I have paid an enormous visit."

"And I have some very special matters to talk of to my friend here," said the doctor eagerly.

Brown accompanied Margaret into the corridor, beyond which she would not let him come.

He found the doctor standing on the hearth-rug when he returned, and the footman was lighting the lamps. As soon as he had closed the door behind him, Macnab said:—

"Let us sit down. I have a good deal to tell you; but at all events it is not bad news."

"They have not given my appointment to any other fellow?" cried Brown eagerly.

"I don't know. If they have, you are pretty sure to get a better one," dryly. "I have a strange story to tell"—with a change of tone. "My boy, I have found your mother—or, rather, she has found you, and claims you!"

"Good God, Doctor! Are you sure of what you say? You are not the man to mock me with false hopes?"

"No one knows better than I do the truth of what I am going to say."

"Say on, then. Who is my mother?"

"Lady Stapylton."

"Lady Stapylton! I cannot believe it. And my father?"

"You are the legitimate son of George Neville, the last Lord Hazelhurst but one——"

"This seems still more incredible. Then Margaret is——"

"Nothing, as regards the lands of Caresford; she is an intruder—a nobody!"

"And what am I?"

"Viscount Hazelhurst of Caresford Court and Baronston."

"Tell me all," said Brown resignedly. "It seems a wild fiction."

And Macnab told him.

Brown listened with breathless attention, and as his old friend proceeded, the conviction that it was no fairy tale he was telling, but a simple matter of fact, grew upon him. His head seemed to spin round with

vague anticipations of bliss, for, like a true lover as he was, his first distinct thought was the possibility that before many months were over he might call Margaret wife! It was too intoxicating. But his mother! How could she have deserted him! Would to heaven he could believe that she had thought him dead, or carried away, or—anything rather than that she deliberately deserted him.

"Ah, Doctor, does she still dislike me? Why does she wish now to acknowledge me?"

"Don't you see, my dear fellow, now that she is sure you are legitimate, that you can take your proper place, she sacrifices herself to do you justice; she has humbled herself to her husband; she has yet to face your sister Valerie's possible contempt. She might have avoided all this by simply holding her tongue. You must not be harsh to her, Hugh; she is, indeed, a broken reed, and I fear her health is seriously affected."

"She has been cruelly deceived and brutally ill-treated. I do not feel I have any right to upbraid her. And Sir Robert has espoused my cause? Do you think I can ever make any return for his goodness! Tell me, do you believe I can prove my claim to the lands and title of my father? My own ambition does not lie in that direction—but to establish my mother's good name."

"I do not imagine you will have much difficulty. I am your chief witness. I ushered you into this world, and have never lost sight of you since. Your mother can prove her marriage, and has some letters which Sir Robert would not let her destroy, from George Neville. The identity of Irma Retz can be abundantly

proved. It will take time, but I feel sure you can assert your rights."

"Doctor, when may I hope to speak with my mother?"

"She longs but dreads to see you."

"It will not be too much for her?"

"Not half so trying as the suspense of waiting till to-morrow. Why, Hugh, you are trembling yourself."

"I am so deucedly weak."

"Come along; I'll announce you. Get it over, my boy, for both your sakes. Your mother has suffered and undergone cruel wrongs—and she is trying to atone."

"Come," interrupted Brown, rising. "I will go to her at once."

"Go gently, then. Take the stairs easy. Her room is only half-way up."

Dr. Macnab opened the door gently, and said: "I bring you one whom you will, I am sure, welcome." And Hugh found himself face to face with his mother.

For a moment they stood gazing at each other.

"Oh, mother!" he exclaimed at last, "had you never any love for me?" The words passed his lips before he could control himself.

"My son, whom I have deserted and disowned! I ought to kneel at your feet to ask pardon and pity. If you turn from me, and disown me, you would be in your right. Can you forgive? Will you forgive? I was mad—mad with the sense of wrong—of treachery."

"God only knows what your suffering, what your temptation must have been, mother. Let me atone to you for all the evil my father has wrought."

He drew near and took her in his arms. Clapsed in them, her weary head upon his shoulder, she at length found relief in a flood of tears; and brokenly, between the sobs which shook her frame, she thanked and blessed him. Neither could bear much more. They had found each other; hereafter they could speak openheartedly on all subjects.

"You must go to rest, my son, and so must I. Tomorrow my dear, good husband will be here—to support me—to break the strange news to Valerie—to guide us all. Go to rest, Hugh, I think I shall rest to-night. But I shall never, never gain my own forgiveness."

Sir Robert's return brought strength and composure to every one. He managed to disclose her mother's early history to Valerie in a rose-colored light, which sent her in an ecstasy of sympathy to embrace Lady Stapylton and welcome Hugh as a brother to love and be proud of. In later times, as fuller knowledge grew upon her, she corrected her first impressions, but preserved her tender regard for both parents, especially her profound respect for the simple, straightforward nobility of her father's nature.

The shock of so great a surprise, and the strong emotion it had created, had arrested Hugh's recovery, and Sir Robert proposed that they should move to London where they could live in greater seclusion, and avoid hearing the gossip which would soon arise about them, while Hugh could be under Dr. Macnab's care and consult one of the great specialists as to the advisability of going to India.

The Lodge might be shut up for some months or a year, by which time Hugh's claim to the title and estates of Hazelhurst must be settled, "though we must make large allowances for the law's delay," observed Sir Robert.

"I think you are right, General," said Hugh, "and my mother also must consult some first-rate authority on nerves."

It was delightful to hear him say "mother," yet the word always carried a little sting of reproach.

"One point I must insist upon," continued Hugh, "before I part, even temporarily, with Margaret, I must tell her my strange story, and the strong probability there is of her estate passing to me,"

"Yes, that is only right," said the General and his wife together.

"Don't you think Margaret has been looking pale and sad lately?" said Valerie.

"Yes; far too pale and sad," cried Hugh. "It is this threat of Lady Hazelhurst's to go away, and I am at the bottom of all the mischief."

"Never mind, Hugh; you will put everything right presently! I will write and ask Margaret to spend to-morrow with us, and then tell her everything. She will be delighted; she would far rather you had the estates than herself. What sensible people you were to fall in love with each other."

"Then," said Sir Robert, with a glance at his wife's troubled face, "you and our invalid here shall go up to town the day after to-morrow under Val's charge. I will stay and see the house shut up and join you. Then we shall be on the spot to keep the lawyers stirring."

The interview between Margaret and her lover may be imagined. Valerie's anticipations proved right. The young heiress was truly pleased at the prospect of Hugh taking possession in his own right of all that belonged to her; and he perceived that, in spite of his efforts to shield his mother, Margaret seemed deeply impressed by the failure of her natural instinct just when an infant most required the mother-love. She said very little on the subject, however.

It was strangely prophetic, Hugh, my giving you your father's seal ring, the day I thought we were parting for years. He must have been a terribly bad man! Never let us speak of him! Poor Aunt Harriet! she does not idealize any one or anything much, and I think she has some notion that he was rather bad; but it will be an awful blow to her to find how matters are." Her soft cheek flushed at the idea that all those years her aunt had never been really married.

"It is awful," exclaimed Hugh; "but that will never touch her—every one will be on her side—and if I succeed her jointure shall never be interfered with. And I must succeed. If I put my hand to it, my darling, I must carry it through; believe me, I would far prefer winning distinction in my profession to inheriting a high place in this way, but my mother must be vindicated."

"Of course. And we must be parted soon, Hugh."

"Yes; but not for so long as we anticipated. You know, sweetheart, that Hazelhurst or no Hazelhurst, I shall go to India!"

"Then, Hugh, you must take me with you," cried Margaret, smiling deliciously.

Hugh was at no loss for an appropriate reply.

"But to come back to poor Aunt Harriet; I think she ought to know soon, and not be rudely informed in a lawyer's letter. I could not tell her!"

"And she would not listen to me," added Hugh.

"There is my guardian, Lord Allingham—a dear old man—some sort of relation—my aunt is very fond of him; suppose we get Sir Robert to tell him, and ask him to see Lady Hazelhurst about it?"

"I'll consult the General, dearest."

Margaret accompanied her aunt to Torquay, the winter abode she finally decided on. That lady made up her mind Margaret was already repenting her folly about the designing *parvenu* who had bewitched her. Her niece was so attentive, so kind, so mute when her ladyship made disparaging remarks about low people who only thought of filthy lucre, and raising themselves on their wives' shoulders, that she telegraphed to Lord Rupert to come and make hay while the sun shone, when, to Lady Hazelhurst's surprise and pleasure, Lord Allingham, who was something of a valetudinarian, made his appearance.

He dined with his ward and her chapèron, and was very sociable, saying less about his maladies and their remedies than usual; but before saying good-night, he asked for an interview with Lady Hazelhurst next day. "To talk over some business matters on which I should like your opinion," he said.

Lady Hazelhurst was flattered, and asked him to luncheon, after which they could talk quietly.

The intervening time was no small trial to Margaret,

as "waiting," when the person or thing waited for is important always is.

Her aunt's complaisant composure distressed her; she felt herself a traitor to know of the impending stroke and yet to keep silence. Well, to-morrow all would be known.

Luncheon seemed to last an immense time, for conversation hung fire; and when at last they rose from the table, Margaret said she would go out for a little walk.

"Take Gibbs with you," said Lady Hazelhurst. "I hope in a day or two you will have a better escort. I have written to Lord Rupert Manvers to come down to us; and I am sure he will," with a significant look at Lord Allingham, which Margaret saw. She smiled to herself at the idea of Rupert troubling her—once he was aware how matters were going.

When she had been out rather more than an hour Margaret began to think she ought to return, to be at hand if Lady Hazelhurst needed her, which she would be sure to do. But on reaching the hotel, where they were staying, she found that Lord Allingham was still closeted with her aunt. Margaret, therefore, took a newspaper, removed her hat, and sat down in her own room, trying to read the lines before her, and hardly gathering their sense.

When, after what seemed to her another hour, Lady Hazelhurst entered, her usually pale face was all a-flame, her eyes alight.

She closed and locked the door behind her. Then drawing nearer, exclaimed in a voice that trembled slightly, "Well, Margaret, I hope you are satisfied with your work!"

"My work, Aunt Harriet?"

"Yes; I call it your work—and it is! If you had not insisted on surrounding yourself with a pack of impostors, it would never have occurred to that man Brown to make up this preposterous story with the help of his accomplice, Sir Robert Stapylton. But you shall see how an English Court of Law will deal with such an infamous barefaced attempt. I blush for you, Margaret—you who are a gentlewoman on both sides of the house to lend yourself to so base a plot. You have forgotten all decency in your mad fancy for that low-born churl, who—who pretends he is the legitimate son of my poor husband! A man of his rank is always a mark for designing, disreputable people—like that Stapylton woman!"

"But Aunt Harriet," urged Margaret, astonished and pained by her violence, when she paused for breath, "I am awfully sorry for you, and so is Hugh. When you recover yourself a little you will see that the whole story bears the stamp of truth—it hangs together—and——"

"Truth!" almost screamed the Viscountess. "It is false!—utterly false! Do you think that a marriage at a miserable suburban registry office would hold against a solemn and holy service performed by that great and good man, the late Bishop of Lynchester, beside my dying mother's couch, in the presence of the Marchioness of Uppingham and that horrid Lottie—Mrs. Macnab—who ought to have known better than to take up such an unprincipled, worthless, scheming adventurer as—Mr. Brown. (With scathing emphasis.) If that public singer De Retz believed she was the wife

of Lord Hazelhurst, why did she wait for twenty-seven or eight years to assert her rights? No one will believe her!"

"I cannot wonder at your grief and anger," began Margaret, taking advantage of another breathless pause, "and I would rather not talk to you about it now, only do believe me; I shall always consider you my aunt; Hugh and I will do our very best to make things as pleasant as——"

"You and Hugh!" The words seemed to choke her. "Is it come to this? I do not consider you my niece! I disown you! If you had shown any decent feeling; if you had implored my pardon with tears, and repudiated that low crew of conspirators whom you gathered around you, I could have forgiven you, for I am only too generous. As it is I will leave you, and never see your face again." She unlocked the door, and rang the bell furiously.

"Send my maid to me!" she exclaimed when a servant appeared. "Tell your people to bring the bill to my courier. I shall leave this evening," and she left the room.

Margaret was shocked; she could not be angry with a person who took so senseless a view of the case; but the result was awkward, and in her turn she rang and asked if Lord Allingham was still at the Crown Hotel, where she knew he had put up.

Her maid went to send a messenger, who soon ascertained that his lordship had not left, and intended remaining till the next morning.

Margaret therefore went to see him, and begged him to remonstrate with Lady Hazelhurst. He complied

with her request though pitying himself profoundly for the dreadful trouble entailed by the duties of guardianship.

Lady Hazelhurst was, however, implacable and unreasonable, and she departed for London by the last train, and the following morning Margaret accompanied her polite but greatly-bored guardian to his residence in B—— Square, where a council of trustees, legal advisers, etc., were speedily summoned, and war was formally declared.

CHAPTER XXVI.

L'ENVOI.

THE great doctor whom Hugh Brown (as he must be called for a little while longer) consulted, pronounced most strongly against his attempting the journey to India before at least three months of repose and attention to hygienic precautions.

"Your future health," he said, "depends on your giving yourself full time to recover and re-establish your strength."

Hugh was too sensible to disobey this dictum, and the plans of his new-found family were formed accordingly. As Lady Stapylton's specialist warned Sir Robert against a winter in England they decided on spending that season at Hyères.

Lady Hazelhurst's hasty and inconsiderate action having broken up Margaret's home; it was arranged that she, too, should go to the Riviera with a suitable chaperon, and the winter months were tranquil, speeding by with marvelous rapidity, the only shadow being caused by Lady Stapylton's evidently failing health.

It is needful to go into detail respecting the conclusion of this "over true tale," when all intelligent readers who have had the patience to get thus far can finish it for themselves?

"The Hazelhurst Succession Case" became a *cause*

célebre, and a delightful source of gossip and discussion through the dull winter months. Finally, before judgment was pronounced, Margaret and her true lover were man and wife. The Lord Chancellor, under their peculiar circumstances, not interposing his formidable veto.

To the surprise of "the world" the new Lord Hazelhurst immediately accepted a military appointment in India, whither his bride accompanied him.

It was the beginning of a real union, which had not more than the usual amount of human trials and difficulties, among which Lord and Lady Hazelhurst did not count the absolute refusal of "Aunt Harriet" to hold any communication with them, though she did not refuse to accept payment of her *soi-disant* dowager's income from the Caresford estates.

Perhaps the following letter will be the best wind-up to the story related in these pages.

From Valerie Stapylton, Eden Lodge, Blankfordshire, to
Lady Hazelhurst, Peishawer, India.

"DEAREST MARGARET.—I have not had courage or composure to write to you fully before; you can well imagine the thick cloud of helpless sorrow which has shrouded us for the last month. Is it not strange that my dear mother should have passed away in Paris, where almost all the chief events of her life occurred?

"She seemed better, and was looking forward to a summer at home—at least I think she was—but I believe the fact is that she never really rallied from the

shock of her first meeting with Hugh. Her heart had been weak for a long time, and though she kept everything from us with marvelous courage and endurance, she could not win her own self-forgiveness. She had gone to bed rather early, and my father, who would always sleep in her room, was roused by hearing her moan. He came to her at once; she grasped his hand, smiled upon him for a moment, then her eyes closed for ever. Death came to her in no unfriendly guise, but how great our loss has been you can judge, though I always knew you never forgave her fully as Hugh did.

"She lies in the Passy Cemetery, beside the brother she loved so well. Tell Hugh how profoundly I sympathize with him, though he cannot mourn as we do. My father is quite broken down.

"You may not be surprised to hear that I have promised to marry Jack Everard when the days of mourning are accomplished. We shall probably live at the Lodge, which the General talks of settling on me. At any rate, Jack, who is one of the best fellows in the world, will help me to cheer and comfort my dear father's sunset days, and oh! how we hope you will soon come back.

"I have Mrs. Macnab's eldest girl staying with me; she is a nice girl. Dr. O'Grady is going to leave, and is in treaty with Jack for his old bachelor quarters, as he, Jack, talks of building large stables here.

"How strangely things have turned, dear Margaret, since you and I rejoiced together because my dear father had taken Eden Lodge and we were to be such near neighbors. There is a "Providence which shapes our ends." Who dare doubt it?

"If only the beloved mother had been spared to us I should have had nothing left to wish for.

"We read of Hazelhurst sometimes in the papers; he seems to be most energetic and successful.

"Write to me soon and tell me everything about your daily life. Best love to Hazelhurst; tell him to write, too. I am greedy for letters.

"Ever yours truly and affectionately,

"VALERIE STAPYLTON."

[THE END.]

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